

# Bravely Tangled up with Dragons

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Summary: The day before Hiccup's final dragon training test, Astrid never finds him in the woods. He suits up, packs up, and heads for the sky. Across the ocean, princess Merida runs away, wishing for anything in the world to change her fate. A hop, a skip, and a boat ride away, Rapunzel with her magic hair just can't wait to be finally free.

## 1. Prologue: Following the Wisps

**\*\*This is a three-way crossover between Tangled, Brave, and How to Train your Dragon. I am not the first one to come up with a crossover like this, but this is an original plot line and is in no way connected to anyone else's story. I don't own the rights to these movies, their creators do. All I own is two DVDs and a wishlist with Brave on it. But anyway, now that the disclaimer is done, onward!\*\***

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><p><strong>Prologue:<strong> Following the Wisps

\* \* \*

><p><em>~Berk~<em>

Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the third. His name was beginning to become something almost famed. Honestly though, the irony was not lost on him. He was always exactly what his people were not supposed to be. He was tall and thin where he should have been short and stocky. He had long arms and long legs, making him look clumsy and awkward next to other boys his age. Sure, there were other kids who ended up with his unfortunate body shape, but at least they made the most of it. Somehow, even though they were just as willowy and weak-looking as he was, they were stronger. Though, he supposed he had to admit it wasn't about them. It was about him.

He was the one everyone avoided, like they could have caught his failure by sitting too close. He was the one that was weak, simpering, little . . . he didn't even know what they thought of him specifically. He just knew they hated him because he was . . . different.

So when he hit and actually downed a Night Fury with one of his 'bizarre and stupid contraptions', he really wasn't surprised that no one believed him. So desperate for recognition, he'd made up stories like it before. He couldn't really be faulted for that though, right? Growing up like he was, where all the best people were everything he exactly wasn't, would make any kid just want to fit in. That's all he wanted. To fit in.

But he didn't kill that damn dragon when he should have. If he had, then maybe now the two of them wouldn't be in this mess! His father would have been proud, his village would have been impressed, and all his problems would be poof! gone. Out of sight and out of mind.

Then he went and made happy-nice-nice with a Night Fury. The same Night Fury he should've killed in the first fricking place. And for a little while, it even seemed like that would have been helping him- he got better in dragon training. He got friends. He got fans!

But now, because he'd gotten better at dragon training, he had to kill a dragon. A Monstrous Nightmare. Tomorrow. Kill a dragon, a dragon very much like Toothless, who was now his best and only real friend. Which made his little problem a little bigger than a little problem. Yeah.

Which leads, directly, into this stupid situation. His father wasn't home- he was down in the meeting hall or something. Planning the great honor his son was about to receive tomorrow. Hoo-ray . . . But anyway, that's why he had to do this now. Because if he didn't, then he'd never get the courage again. And this is the only chance he was going to get. Because he couldn't do it. Because he just had to be the only Viking who just couldn't kill a dragon.

Hiccup set the basket filled with all of his few favorite possessions on the ground with a sigh. "Leaving." He muttered to himself, looking around. "We're leaving. Looks like you and I are taking a little vacation. Forever."

He looked around for the black body of his Night Fury, who was looking at him curiously from the other side of their little valley. He blinked his big green eyes and lumbered to his feet, coming around the lake toward him. Hiccup watched the sleek dragon move before he sighed and turned his attention back to the basket, opening the top to be sure he hadn't forgotten anything he'd miss. There were a few of his tools from Gobber's workshop, the woolen blanket off his bed at home, a few changes of clothes, and some food from the meeting hall's kitchen. It wasn't much, and rational thought told him he'd need more. Then again, rational thought told him he shouldn't even be thinking about doing this- let alone even remotely planning it.

And yet here he was. Running away. Like a coward.

Hiccup shook his head and tried to focus. He had to make sure he

didn't leave anything behind. Having to go back into the village would kill any resolve he'd managed to muster up. Sure, he was being a coward, but what other choice did he have? He couldn't kill the dragon. That was it. The bottom line. The final nail in his coffin. His father would realize he was a failure and had been betraying the entire village for weeks. And if, by some miracle he did manage to kill the Nightmare, then where did that put his relationship with Toothless? Odin, his life was just so, so messed up!

Hiccup sighed and pulled his helmet out of his things. He fixed the crooked horn and stared at the dull metal and old leather. His mother's breast plate. Yeah. That still squicked him out, but . . . it was really the only piece of his mother he had left. And after this, it would be the last connection to his family he'd have at all. Toothless wouldn't be happy that he'd brought it, but Hiccup figured the dragon would just have to get over it.

Hiccup replaced the helmet and closed the lid on the basket. He sighed and stood up, fixing a strap on his leather riding vest. He looked up into the late sunlight peaking through the leaves in the trees on the cliffs above. For a split moment he felt like something was odd, or different. Something was wrong with what he was seeing. Something was supposed to be here. But it wasn't. It was like *deja vu*, but . . . nah, he was probably just nervous. He'd never done something like this before. He could just chalk the feeling up to the jitters.

Toothless growled a confused noise from behind Hiccup, and the young viking shook his head. "It's nothing buddy," He assured the dragon, shaking his head clear of the stupid feeling. "C'mere you," he chuckled and grabbed the basket. "Lemme fasten this to your saddle."

It took a bit longer than he would have liked, but none the less he managed to keep Toothless still long enough to get the basket situated on his back. Toothless gave Hiccup a 'look' once he was done and was about to climb on, and Hiccup forced a smile. "Heh, don't worry bud," He said, not sure if he was trying to calm the dragon or himself. "I'm good."

He sat himself down in the saddle and hooked himself in, gripping the reigns white-knuckled. He looked around the forest, animals and birds making their usual noises. Noises he'd been hearing since, well, since birth. '\_It's not too late,\_' He told himself. '\_You can still just stop . . . and go back home.\_'

Home. Where his full-of-pride father was waiting to gush about the kill. No. Hiccup would rather leave being his father's pride than to stay and become his worst shame.

So Hiccup put his foot on the pedal that worked Toothless' prosthetic tail fin, and together the unlikely friends took to the skies. As they flew toward to coast, they went by the village. And down in the village, Hiccup could have sworn he saw the blonde head of . . . (sigh) Astrid. She didn't look up and she didn't see him, sitting on a rock while sharpening her battle axe.

She was always beautiful to him. Like the shining blade of a brand new sword. Cold, sharp and quick; dangerous and deadly.

She set her sharpening stone down and wiped sweat off her brow. He saw her head move and for one terrifying second Hiccup thought she saw him. But she didn't start screaming or grab her axe. She didn't freak out and call for the rest of the dragon-slayers.

So Hiccup didn't worry. He didn't change his mind or loosen the grip of his fists in the reigns. He forced his head away from the only home he'd ever known and faced the wide open ocean.

"Bye, Astrid."

Toothless roared and flapped his wings, taking off fast enough to leave nothing but the burst of the sound barrier behind.

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><p><em>~Castle Dun'Broch~<em>

Merida hadn't \_meant\_ to ruin the tapestry. Not really. In fact, she'd rather liked the damned thing. It was made out of thick cloth and thread, lots of greens and earthen colors. Mum had slaved over it daily. Every night after supper without fail. She loved it so much that sometimes Merida honestly believed her mother wished the girl in the tapestry was her daughter instead. She looked quiet. Obedient. \_Tame.\_ Everything Merida wasn't.

But her sword had been so sharp, and Merida had been so angry. She'd twisted the blade into the cloth like it was her mother's heart, tearing a rift between them in both the tapestry . . . and in her heart.

And her bow- och, her \_bow!\_ She- that \_monster\_- threw it into the fire! Merida swore she could still hear her beloved weapon crackling and popping among the coals as she raced out of the castle. And for what? Some stupid age-old tradition? Who cared about some stupid legend! How \_could\_ \_she?\_ She \_knew\_ Merida wasn't some . . . some . . . \_princess!\_

Her, now ruined, silver and gold silk gown was as easy to move in as her favorite green dress. She ran out the door in the kitchen, not even bothering with grabbing Angus' saddle from the storehouse. She climbed onto her favorite horse's back, gripped his mane and commanded him: "Out! Out out out!"

Angus whinnied and stormed out of the stables, carrying Merida past the walls and off the grounds in moments. She pressed her face into his neck and let herself go, heaving great wracking sobs into his neck. She was incoherent and uncaring, trees rushing by in a big messy blur. Merida felt she could care less about the speed they were going, so long as they got \_away\_. \_Far, far away\_. As far away as she could get!

How? How could she? Her mother had always been a tad unreasonable, sure, but this? Marriage? A \_competition\_ over her? It wasn't fair! Merida couldn't even choose which of them she wanted! Those three \_lads\_, like wee \_children\_ they were! Even if she \_had\_ \_the\_ opportunity to choose a husband, he wouldn't be any one of those three! Merida had \_standards\_ for men, and those three? They fell a right side short!

Merida hid her eyes in Angus' black hair. She still just couldn't wrap her mind around it all. It was one thing for her mother to try and mold her after herself all her life, but this was another story completely. Why? Why couldn't . . . for once in her life, why couldn't that woman just listen to her-

Angus whinnied shrilly and suddenly, the wind that was tangling Merida's already wild hair switched directions. Her horse planted his hooves and skid to an abrupt stop, pitching poor Merida clear over his head. She rolled across the grass and the dirt, tearing up her silk gown even worse than it already was. "Angus!" She wailed. Oh this was just perfect, wasn't it? Now she could add scrapes and bruises to the list of today's trauma.

Merida carefully picked herself up, sniffing and wiping her stinging palms against her knees. The stupid dress was already ruined beyond saving by now anyway. What was the point in worrying about a few more stains? "What a joyful day this is," Merida muttered to herself bitterly. She brushed aside one of her curls and finally took a look around. All around her were large carved standing stones, reaching up high into the air. Each stone was placed the exact same distance from each other, settled into a perfect circle. Some were tall, taller than her and taller than the gatehouse at the castle. Others were short and squat, smaller than her but wider than Angus.

She furrowed her brows, turning in a small circle to take it all in. The forest around her was completely silent, which was strange. She spent so much time out in these woods; the sounds of all the critters going about their days was such a usual backdrop to her outings that without it, she felt suddenly very uncomfortable. But even with the oddness of the trees around, she couldn't control the wonder and awe she felt. Something about this circle felt almost . . . sacred. However, there was still something slightly off about it all.

"Angus," Merida whispered to her horse, who was hiding behind one of the stones. "Come on!"

Angus snorted and flipped his mane, looking suspiciously like he was shaking his head. Merida huffed. Only her horse would end up being a chicken. She rolled her eyes and looked around again. Now where was she supposed to go? What was she supposed to do? She didn't have any of her weapons-

Her poor, poor burned bow . . . that monster was probably laughing as it burned, wasn't she? She'd be standing there over the fire, using the poker to keep her bow in place as the flames turned it to charcoal. She was probably standing in the ward, eating her cakes like a dainty lady and waiting all smug and prideful for Merida to come crawling back. But no. Merida would never go back after what she'd done! She wouldn't ever give her that kind of satisfaction! What had Merida even done to deserve it? So she fired some arrows and won her own hand in the competition! Was that really worth the complete destruction of her favorite-

A soft whispering sound, like a child singing, reached Merida's ears from over her shoulder. She turned and there, across the circle from her, floated a little blue bit of smoke. It floated there between the stones, waving at her with its whisper arms.

"A wisp," Merida whispered, eyes wide. She started toward it and suddenly the trail behind it was lit up by a whole long line, leading her off into the deeper parts of the forest. Behind her, Angus snorted and galloped around the stones to catch up with her.

There was a time, when Merida was a little girl and her family had gone on a trip into the forest for her birthday, she'd managed to wander away from her parents. While wandering around, blissfully and obliviously lost, she'd spotted one of the wisps. Her little five year old self toddled after it, but when she reached it, it vanished. Another had appeared, and thus she chased the little smoke beings all the way back to the campsite. But thinking back on that day just filled her with more anger. That was the day her father gave her her first bow. The very same bow her mother \_destroyed.\_ Merida really hoped the wisps weren't about to lead her back to the castle.

The two of them walked for a long time, going deeper and deeper into the thick untouched forests by the minute. As they went along, Merida spotted a little cottage sitting in a small clearing. It was cute and looked cozy, and for a moment Merida was tempted to go and look at it a bit more.

But the wisps weren't leading her toward the cottage. They went around it, leading off even farther. Merida had to admit her feet were tired . . . maybe she could look around the cottage a bit and come back once she'd rested?

The closest wisp beckoned to her. Merida looked from it to the cottage, then back. With a firm breath and a defiant set of her jaw, she turned herself forcibly away and continued on, leaving the little tempting cottage behind. After all, Will o' the Wisps were said to lead you directly to your fate. A fate Merida prayed would not involve a marriage of \_any\_ sort.

\* \* \*

><p><em>~Corona~<em>

Rapunzel lounged in the window seat of her tower, lazily braiding her hair. She'd already cleaned the floor. Twice. She'd painted the walls. She baked. She'd danced. She'd sang and sewed and played chess and now? Well, she was just bored. She supposed she could have read her books again, but by now she could already recite every page of it from memory alone. Still, it was better than nothing.

Mother had already left for the night, going . . . well, Rapunzel didn't know exactly. Mother never told her and she'd never thought to ask. But that was fine, really. She didn't mind so long as Mother came home in the morning. So really there wasn't anything to worry about.

Still . . . sometimes she did get lonely. But that was what Pascal was for! Her little chameleon was sleeping comfortably on her stomach, her best and only friend. She didn't need other friends though. Pascal and Mother were all she'd ever need. All she'd ever want! So being lonely was pretty pointless. She was perfectly happy up here, with all her paints and her toys and her drawings. What more could she want?

She gazed out the window, her fingers still working with her hair.

Her bright blonde hair always looked the prettiest color in the fading sunlight, always reminding her of Mother's lullaby.

"Flower, gleam and glow," Rapunzel hummed, feeling the tickle of the magic as it flowed from her scalp into her roots and made her hair glow an even brighter gold. "Let your power shine . . . "

She braided with the colors, rushing through the braid and down, down and down, all the way to the ends . . . wherever it was. Rapunzel sighed and let the song carry off in the breeze, mingling with the roar of the waterfall behind the tower. Pascal twitched on her stomach and rolled over, blinking his little eyes open. He yawned and stretched, then froze.

Rapunzel stopped singing, looking down at the chameleon curiously. "Pascal?" She whispered, feeling the magic fade. "Is everything all . . . "

The petite girl followed his gaze and found a little blue light to be sitting on the windowsill beside her. At first she was afraid, but the little thing didn't look like it was trying to hurt her, or steal her hair, so . . . "Hello there," She whispered to it, reaching out her fingers to try and touch the smoke coming off of the little glowing ball.

When she touched it the glow vanished, making Rapunzel leap away a little bit. She lurched to her feet and stumbled from the window, staring at the windowsill with wide eyes. Pascal scurried up her dress and hid behind a lock of her hair. The two of them stood there in tense silence. Rapunzel looked down at Pascal, who shrugged. He didn't know what it was either.

She heard a soft whisper and there it was again, waving little smoke arms for her to come back. Cautiously, Rapunzel tip toed forward, and when she got close the little smoke-thingy vanished all over again. This time she didn't back away in fear though. Instead, Rapunzel set her knee and stuck her head over the windowsill, looking down at the ground oh so far away.

"Oh!" Rapunzel gasped. All the way down from the windowsill to the ground, the little blue wispy-things were waving at her. They were all in a line, leading down to the bright green grass and across the field, into the dark little cave that Mother always went through when leaving or coming back. There was a world out there- the world where Mother always brought her things from, like new paints or more food or cloth to make dresses. Rapunzel wanted to see it, wanted to see it all so badly!

But there were bad people out there. Ruffians. Thugs. Men who would use her gifts for selfish and evil reasons. They would hurt her. Cut off all her hair and sell it- or even sell her! Sell her like some kind off- . . . off . . . she couldn't remember the word. But it was bad. And scary! She couldn't. She could \_never!\_

Frightened, Rapunzel clutched Pascal close and protective against her heart, backing away. The smoke came back and started to beckon her again. Anything that wanted to lead her out into that big scary place just couldn't be good! Desperately, Rapunzel grabbed the shutters and slammed them shut, hoping to keep the smoky thing out.

Then Rapunzel gathered up as much hair into her arms as she could and sprinted up her stairs to hide under her blankets until Mother came home in the morning. Who knows what kind of scary things were out there? And after all, who knows where those things were going to lead her?

## 2. One: I Don't Believe in Fairy Tales

**\*\*For Merida, I'll be trying to give her a bit more of an authentic accent. If there are any words you don't understand, or if someone actually Scottish reads this and sees something wrong, just let me know! I'll get back to you asap.**

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**Chapter One: I don't believe in Fairy Tales**

\* \* \*

*~Dun' Broch~*

Hiccup stared up at the sky, laying flopped out on his back with his arms above his head. He spotted a cloud above him, a large, poofy cloud that had absolutely no shape whatsoever. Stupid clouds. All of 'em being so . . . not-uniform. Not all the same. All so fluffy and looking like marshmallows. But they weren't marshmallows. Didn't even taste like marshmallows. They just tasted like . . . air. And stuff.

Toothless made a noise from off . . . somewhere. Hiccup tilted his head in that direction and found the dragon to have his head dunked in a river. Hiccup sat up. "What are you doing?" He asked, rubbing his forehead.

Toothless lifted his head with a splash and turned, grinning around the large fish held in his teeth. He made a noise like 'hey! I got dinner!' Hiccup chuckled despite himself and laid back down in the grass on the riverbank. Toothless tossed the fish toward the smoking fire pit where they could cook it later. He got up and lumbered over to the teenager laying in the grass like a lump. Hiccup looked up when the dragon appeared over his head, blocking his view of the clouds. Stupid clouds. So big and so fluffy and looking like a beard . . .

Beard. His dad had a beard. A big one. Big and orange but it never seemed to hide his smiles. Or his frowns.

Toothless made a confused noise. Hiccup reached up and scratched his scales gently. "Yeah yeah. I'm fine."

Of course, fine could be used as more of a relative term. It had been officially five days since he left Berk. He and Toothless had been flying at top-speed for about two days before they finally spotted solid ground again, but of course that wasn't good enough for him. They had to keep going over the land for another day, but by then Toothless was all but falling out of the sky in exhaustion. So they landed. Here. Where they've been for the last two days. So yeah. Five days. Almost a week since he'd left. His father would be worried by



now. Would he look for him? Would he get the whole village together and lead out a search party?

Hiccup rubbed his face and grunted, getting up. There was no point in feeling bad about it. What's done was done and there wasn't anything he could do about the decision now.

But for Thor's sake he was an idiot!

Hiccup wandered toward their smoldering campfire and sat down, Toothless curling up behind him and acting like a chair. Or at least a pillow for him to rest against. He grabbed the fish Toothless caught and skewered it on a stick, then set it by the fire to cook. He'd gotten over his squeamish feelings and stopped feeling bad for the fish after he'd almost eaten a frog yesterday. Yeah. Not eating anything but stale bread for three days will do that to a guy.

It would take a while though, so he leaned back against Toothless and closed his eyes. The trees around him were so similar to the ones at home . . . if he stopped thinking then he could pretend he was still in the forests back in Berk. But now that he thought about it, he didn't even know where they were. Hiccup rubbed his forehead and glared into the fire. "I should've taken a map from the house," He muttered. Toothless swished his tail and lifted his haunches in a shrug. He didn't care. So long as there were fish and no eels. Hiccup rolled his eyes and scratched the back of Toothless' neck. At least he still had his dragon. Toothless would never leave him, or be ashamed of him.

Toothless lifted his head and snapped his gaze around. His body went stiff against Hiccup and the young viking looked up at him in confusion. "What's the matter, bud?" He asked.

Toothless narrowed his eyes and slunk to his feet, staring into the trees. His body went tense and that was the point when warning bells went off in Hiccup's head. He scrambled to his feet and ducked his head. "Wh-what is it?" He winced at his stuttering, but considering a faint growl was beginning to form in Toothless' throat, he forgave himself. A little. Not really.

A sudden loud and shrill scream sent every hair on Hiccup's body on end. He heard branches snapping and suddenly a girl with wild hair was bursting into the clearing, running at full-speed. She screamed and Hiccup shouted, because she didn't stop until after she'd run headlong into him. They went tumbling to the ground in a heap of tangled limbs and wild curls, grunting and groaning in pain.

Hiccup opened his eyes and tried to force himself into an upright position, but it was hard with about a hundred pounds of girl sitting on his chest. She sat up and flipped a handful of her bright red curls out of her delicate, round face and gave him a wide-eyed look. "Wha-" He started.

"Gie doon!" The girl commanded, pushing his shoulders back into the ground. Behind them, Toothless snarled and charged forward. The girl screamed and rolled off of Hiccup, landing in a heap beside him. Hiccup scrambled to sit up and threw himself in front of the girl, but she wasn't the one Toothless was after. The dragon spread his wings and leaped over them, landing in a protective crouch. Hiccup then heard a roar, a roar that was not Toothless or another dragon.

"B-bear!" She shrieked, scuttling away on all fours. Hiccup pushed himself to his feet and ran forward, finding a large black bear about ten feet tall to be staring Toothless down. It's muzzle was crooked like it had broken and healed wrong, with broken weapons sticking out of it's hide like some kind of demented porcupine. It reached out with it's claws and raked them across the dragon's face.

"Toothless!" Hiccup yelled, panicking. What kind of bear would challenge a dragon?

Toothless snapped his head around, roared at Hiccup then used his tail to smack into Hiccup's stomach. He landed on the girl who cried out as they were sent flying backwards.

"Nae!" The girl yelped, trying to get to her feet. Hiccup grabbed her by the sleeve of her brown dress and pulled her back.

"No!" He snapped. "Don't get in the way!"

Toothless batted at the bear and snarled, rearing back on his hind legs and just barely standing taller than the bear. He opened his mouth and let out a roar, the loudest roar Hiccup had ever heard him make. Louder even than the time he was doing it in his face. Toothless raised his claws and swatted the bear to the ground, pouncing on the animal and pinning it down.

This went on for several terrible moments. The bear lashed out and caught on Toothless' head again, but the dragon just pulled back and shot fire at the bear with a loud snarl. "\_Get down!\_" Hiccup cried, grabbing the girl and pulling her out of the way before the shock wave caught them both.

He covered the girl as her curls went everywhere, and then everything got quiet. They heard the sound of an animal running back into the forest, and after a few seconds Hiccup figured it was safe to lift his head. He looked around cautiously and heaved a sigh of relief. There were all kinds of burn marks on the ground and in the trees, and he could see a faintly flickering bush right beside Toothless, but it seemed the bear was gone.

"Looks like everything's okay now," Hiccup chuckled awkwardly. The girl's chest was heaving as she struggled to get her breathing back to normal. She turned and gave Hiccup a wide-eyed stare and he offered her a weak grin. "You all-"

She reeled back and punched him in the face. Hard.

"OW!" He yelped, falling onto his back. Again. "Why would you do that?"

"Ow!" The girl cried, flapping her hand around a little. "Ouch ow ow!"

Hiccup rubbed his jaw and gave her an incredulous look. "What is your problem?" He demanded as Toothless came back over. He gave the girl a glare, then laid down on the ground and started licking one of his feet. Hiccup glanced down then focused on his dragon. "Hey, you okay buddy?" He asked with concern. He could see a few deep scratches along his head, but they weren't bleeding too badly. Toothless

snorted some smoke and closed his eyes. Hiccup lifted his gaze back to the girl again, taking a closer look at her.

She was short and slender, with a round face and large blue eyes. A sprinkle of freckles dotted across her small nose. She had a wild mass of tangled red hair, like the flames that wrapped around the body of a Monstrous Nightmare. Looking into her watery crystal glare, he felt the same feeling he got from looking an agitated dragon in the eyes. This was a dangerous situation. Whatever he did right now could spell disaster.

Cautious now, Hiccup held up his hands and got back up onto his feet. He offered her one of his hands, keeping the other above his head. The girl stared at his hand for a moment, frowned, then took it. Hiccup stepped back, helping her get back onto her feet.

" . . . thank ye." She mumbled, holding her arms against herself protectively. Her voice held an accent much like his father's, only much thicker. "I could have handled it me'self," She turned her head away a little bit, rubbing her arms. "If I had . . . me bow . . . " Her eyes went distant, but she snapped back to attention and nodded her head to him. "But thank ye. Ye and yer . . . " The girl craned her head and gave Toothless a cautious look. " . . . creature."

Hiccup glanced at Toothless who snorted again. "You don't have to be scared," He tried to assure her. She made a face.

"Dinnae judge me wrong, laddie!" She snapped, orange curls quivering with anger. Hiccup held his hands above his head again.

"Okay, okay, you're not scared, right!" He rushed to agree. The girl narrowed her eyes at him, then sighed. She rubbed her upper arms, and it was then Hiccup realized her dress wasn't brown at all. It was actually a light blue color, just torn and stained with enough dirt and mud to look brownish. Her skin was covered in bumps and bruises and her skin was a scraped up. Taking a closer look, he realized her eyes were red and a little swollen. Like she'd been crying not too long ago.

She sniffled and rubbed at her left eye, proving this a bit further. Hiccup tilted his head to the side and lowered his hands. "Are . . . are you alright?"

The girl nodded. "Aye." She mumbled.

Hiccup grinned. "My name is Hiccup. And that's Toothless."

Said dragon lifted his head and gave her his imitation of a smile. Hiccup chuckled awkwardly and the girl nodded like she didn't quite believe him. "Aye . . . toothless." She said wryly. "M'name's prin- . . . Merida." She cut herself off then shook her head, sending her curls everywhere. "Merida."

"Merida." Hiccup repeated. "That's an unusual name." His remark earned a raised eyebrow from the girl.

"Aye, and yer's makes much more sense." She shot back.

Hiccup frowned even though he wanted to grin. "Aye." He mimicked her

accent, getting a small giggle. He looked back toward the place where that bear had been a minute ago. The bush wasn't burning anymore, but it was still smoking a little bit. "So what \_was\_ that?"

"Mor'du," She shivered. "A demon bear . . . he chased me all across the glades . I thought I was safe following . . . " Merida trailed off and shook her head again. She seemed to be doing that often. Maybe she was just having trouble getting her thoughts together. Hiccup felt he could relate. "But he came outta no where. Spooked me horse and he ran off on me. Would have been fine a'course . . . " Her voice dropped a bit and she seemed to be talking to herself. "If that \_beast\_ hadnae . . . "

Did she mean the bear? "Well, don't worry about it. Toothless took care of him." Hiccup declared proudly.

Merida looked over at the dragon and after a cautious glance back at Hiccup, she approached him. The dragon growled as the red headed girl came closer, but Merida didn't recoil in fear like she did from the bear. Her delicate fingers brushed at one of the scratches the bear's claws had left in Toothless' scales. " . . . nae." The girl shook her head. "Yer creature only scared 'im off." She stood up and walked with purpose toward the river. Hiccup watched her with slight interest as she easily tore a strip off the end of her dress, bent down to soak the cloth in the running water, then carried it back. She wrung it out as she walked, dripping down her skirt but she didn't react in the slightest.

Toothless narrowed his eyes when she reached for him with the cloth, letting off little growls. "Is a'right, ye big lug," She mumbled, frowning. "Dinnae think I'll hurt ye."

After a moment Toothless relaxed, lowering the fins on his head to show he was being docile. Merida smiled. "There's a love. Now, hold still," She dabbed at the scratches on his scales, turning the blue cloth red with what little blood was on him. "Not deep . . . good thing yer skin's thick,"

Hiccup stood behind her in a silence that only seemed to be awkward to him. She continued to whisper soothingly to Toothless, not flinching when he looked at her, or even remotely acting like she was afraid. She was so different from the girls back on Berk. None of them would have been scared either, but they would have all grabbed their battle axes and their knives and gone after Toothless without a second thought, even if he'd just saved their lives.

"You're not . . . " Hiccup began before he could stop himself. He mentally kicked himself for speaking up, but it was too late now because Merida was looking at him over her shoulder. "You're not . . . afraid of him?"

"I've woken up to worse," She replied bitterly. "But nae. I'm nae afraid a' yer . . . Toothless." Merida smiled at the dragon and pulled the cloth away when she figured she'd gotten all the blood off. She stared at the strip that had once been light blue and part of her dress, but shrugged without a care and tossed the stained and ruined strip over her shoulder. "Never seen a creature like 'im before. What's he again?"

"A Night Fury," Hiccup said instinctively. "A dragon."

"Dragon." Merida whispered, running her fingers along Toothless' forehead and neck. "Only ever heard of 'em in stories . . . fairy tails."

"I don't believe in fairy tales." Hiccup said.

Merida gave him a wry smile. "Me neither." She sighed and pushed on her knees to stand up, tossing some of her curls out of her face with a toss of her head. "Thank ye both again. I dinnae ken what I would have done if yer Toothless wasn't here to help."

"Pfft," Hiccup waved her off, his face flushed. "Woulda' done it for anyone."

Merida hummed and looked around the trees again. Her smile faded and for a moment she looked very, very lost. Then her face brightened and she rounded on Hiccup, making him take a small step back. "Yer nae from here, aye?" She demanded.

"Uhh . . . aye?" Hiccup said, because with that accent sometimes it was hard to understand.

She gripped the front of his riding vest. "Take me with ye!" She begged.

"What?" Hiccup yelped.

Merida looked so hopeful he thought she was about to cry again, even though her eyes were so red there couldn't be many tears left.

"Please! Oh I beg of ye, there's nothing left for me here anymore! I have to go . . . or something terrible will happen!"

"I- . . . I don't- . . . " Hiccup stuttered, glancing at Toothless for some backup. The dragon just shrugged, being no help whatsoever.

"Please, Hiccup," Merida whispered. "I canae . . . I canae live my life this way . . . they- they're gonna make me do something that I just- that I just- I willnae do it! I just . . . please, Hiccup . . . Take me away with ye."

Making her do something she just can't. So she ran away. Ran away so she wouldn't have to . . . well. That sounded all rather familiar, didn't it? He chewed the inside of his cheek, averting his eyes from her begging stare so he could think. The two of them were in the same situation, weren't they? She was trying to leave everything she knew behind . . . just like he did. He looked at Toothless who shrugged again, like he didn't care either way. He heaved a sigh and looked at the girl again, her hands clasped together over her heart.

" . . . are you sure about this?" He asked slowly. "It's a one-way ticket, you know."

"Aye," Merida nodded. "I ken."

He chewed his cheek some more. He didn't know anything about this girl. She could be anyone. She could be a farmhand or maid running from a cruel master. Hel, she could be a princess running from a betrothal for all he knew! But even then, she looked so hopeful. This

was a big leap of faith. But was it any bigger than deciding to free a Night Fury rather than kill it? Or trying to befriend it as apposed to trying to kill it? Or deciding to leave rather than become a murderer?

"Mmmmmnnnnngggggfine!" He groaned and spat the word, tugging hard on his bangs in frustration. "Fine fine, you can come! Just stop with the eyes, will ya?"

Merida blinked. Then a wide grin spread across her face. "Och, really? Ye mean it? Truly?"

"Yes!" Hiccup grumbled. "You can come."

He raised an eyebrow when she squealed and did a little dance in her excitement, not sure if he should be amused or annoyed. "Oh thank ye! Tank ye thank ye thank ye!" She jumped forward and nearly crushed him in a hug, then pulled away just as fast. "Hear that, Toothless? I can come with ye!"

Toothless made a noise like 'yay', but it was more sarcastic than overjoyed. Merida didn't care. She just looked so darned happy. She spun away, still dancing in a circle, and Hiccup narrowly missed getting a mouthful of her curls. "Alright alright, I get it, you're happy."

Merida giggled. "Aye, thank ye again."

Hiccup waved her off and looked down at the fire, where his fish was still cooking completely untouched from the events of today. He walked toward it and Toothless followed him, resuming their positions before Merida and her demon bear showed up. Her smile faded a bit and she looked toward the tree line. Hiccup followed her gaze.

"Do you need a moment?" He asked.

"Oh, aye." Merida blushed a little. "May I?"

He waved her off in answer. Merida bobbed her head and ran off into the trees, disappearing. Hiccup let his head fall back against Toothless in exhaustion. "Oh the gods really do hate me, don't they?"

Toothless growled gently and nuzzled against his rider comfortingly.

Merida returned a few minutes later, carrying with her some kind of white bundle. She threw it into the fire as soon as she got to it, falling to her knees with a pleased sigh. Hiccup watched the cloth burn for a moment before asking. "What was that?"

Merida smiled and took a deep breath. "Nothing but some trash." She assured.

Hiccup shrugged. "Whatever. Hey, the fish is ready. Hungry?"

"Aye!"

\* \* \*

><p>A few hours later, the sun had finally set and Hiccup, Merida, and Toothless were just laying there while the fire slowly burned itself out. Merida was leaning with her back propped up against Toothless, all but out cold against the dragon. Hiccup was close to sleep as well, lightly dozing while keeping his eyes on the fire. it had nearly smoldered down into embers, but you could never be too careful.<p>

What was he doing? Letting some strange girl join him on his journey? Heh. Journey. He wasn't on a journey. He was running away. And so was she. But where were they supposed to go?

"Anywhere is beauty," Merida murmured beside him. Hiccup turned and his face colored a little. Had he spoken out loud? "Aye."

"Oh hel," He muttered. He really had to stop doing that. "So you really don't care? Where we go, I mean?"

She shifted against Toothless to get a bit more comfortable. "Nae. Long as I'm away I donnae mind."

"Alright . . . I guess."

They sat in silence for a long time, and when Hiccup was just about to fall asleep, Merida sprung up with a gasp.

"Oh nae!" She blurted. Hiccup snapped his eyes open as she clamored to her feet.

"What?" He asked as she looked around wildly.

"Th-the dogs!" She hissed.

Hiccup furrowed his eyebrows. Dogs? What dogs . . . ? Oh. Now he could hear barking. But what about the dogs?

>"Oh nae nae nae!" She grabbed Hiccup's basket and dragged it over to Toothless, who'd gotten up on his feet and was looking around just as panicked as Merida. "Hiccup we have to leave! Now!"<p>

"Why?" Hiccup asked, getting up and wide awake. "Why what- what's going on?"

"Please, Hiccup," Merida whispered, grabbing his vest to make him listen. "Yer aught to trust me! I'll never get away if we don't leave now!"

"Alright alright," Hiccup agreed. Together he and Merida got his things together and Toothless stomped on the fire to put it out. Hiccup climbed onto Toothless' back and reached out a hand for Merida. She reached for him and froze, listening to the sounds of barking dogs and many voices not far off. She was having second thoughts, he could see it in her eyes. "Merida." He spoke gently, lowering his hand. "You don't have to do this."

She stared at him then looked over her shoulder. "Aye," She whispered, then grabbed his hand. Hiccup heaved her up onto the saddle behind him, but she knocked against his basket of supplies and knocked it over. "God dammit!" She cried, grabbing at it. Hiccup's helmet went tumbling to the ground.

"No!" Snapped Hiccup. He undid his harness and was half way off Toothless when two large black hounds ran through the bushes and into their little clearing. They barked and bayed, howling and making Toothless antsy.

"Hiccup!" Merida gripped his shoulders, holding him in place. "We've aught to-"

"But my-"

Toothless roared when a dog snapped at him. Hiccup grit his teeth and forced himself to shove the thought of loosing the helmet from his mind. He gripped the saddle handles and commanded Merida firmly to "Hold on! Hold on like Thor himself glued your hands down!"

"A-aye!" Merida agreed, and then they were airborne.

She moved her hands to Hiccup's waist and pressed herself against him. Toothless carried them upward for nearly a hundred feet, and there they hovered to look over the forest below. About half a mile away was a large party moving through the trees, all with weapons and torches and men shouting at the top of their lungs. "What did you do?" Hiccup demanded.

Merida hid her face in his shoulder. "They're nae after me," She murmured. "They're searching for . . . for the princess. But she's . . . she's long gone."

"Then why are you so . . . ?" He started, but Merida shook her head against him.

"Please . . . " She whispered. "Just . . . can we just . . . ?"

Hiccup pushed his concerns out of his mind. He was getting oddly good at doing that. "Yeah yeah. Alright, bud, you heard her. Let's get out of here."

Toothless let out a roar that could have been heard from miles around, and together the three of them flew away. As they were flying, Hiccup could have sworn he heard Merida whisper "Goodbye, Da," . . . but then again that could have just been the wind in his ears.

### 3. Two: Not Something You See Everyday

\*\*Yesterday I uploaded a picture to act as the cover image. It's my own drawing so I only have to disclaim the characters. But I did that already and you people know I don't own the rights to them anyway. But if you wanted to see the full image please go to my Deviant account here:\*\*

\*\* [www . sugar-high-sakeo . deviantart art/ Bravely-Tangled-up-with-Dragons -316810715](http://www.sugar-high-sakeo.deviantart.com/art/Bravely-Tangled-up-with-Dragons-316810715)  
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\*\*(remove all spaces)  
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\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter Two: <strong>Not Something You See Everyday

\* \* \*

><p><em>~Corona~<em>

When Eugene Fitzherbert was younger, he had an avid imagination. Every night back in the orphanage, the younger kids would collect around him on his bed, sitting on the old thin mattresses or curled up on the floor, their eyes wide with wonder and longing. They listened to his stories for the exact same reason that he told them: because everyone wanted what they couldn't have.

Now, his usual fail safes were Flynnigan Rider stories, the swashbuckling rich-as-a-king pirate and his many adventures, but sometimes the kids wanted something else. Something new. So one day, he told them the story of the kingdom, and the lost princess.

He'd begin his tale by starting with a witch. She was always mean, cruel, and selfish. She was also very vain, so when she found a magical flower that could do anything it's owner asked, she came up with a song to please the flower. In return, the flower healed her and turned the old witch young again.

"Thas' not possible," One of the older boys snorted from behind Eugene, ruining the atmosphere he was trying to build.

"Is too, Thomas!" Eugene snorted.

Anyway, since the witch was so selfish, she hid the flower from other people who could have needed it more. That went on for many years, decades, many even centuries! But then the kingdom of Corona was founded, and their King Richard and Queen Lillian rose to power. They wanted a baby, but when the Queen became pregnant, she fell deathly ill. So ill that if she didn't get better, both she and the baby would die. Knowing his family was running out of time, the King sent out word far and wide for someone to bring forth anything that could heal the Queen.

Many tried, and all failed. And the witch hoarded her flower from the rest of the world.

Since the Queen was running out of time, people began looking for nothing short of a miracle. Then they found the flower. And they healed the Queen! Then everything was happily ever after, right?

"Wrong," Thomas snorted again. Eugene wanted to hit him with something. "The princess got kidnapped and thrown into a vat of orphans just like you lot." He nodded at the now wide-eyed children. "And since findin' one girl in the middle a' this mess is like lookin' for one piece of straw in a bale of hay, they're never gonna find her."

"So . . . I could be the princess?" A blond girl, far too young to be the princess, asked with wide eyes. Eugene chuckled and ruffled her dirty and sweaty hair.

"Sure you could." He assured her, and promptly threw a boot at Thomas before he could ruin the girl's moment of excitement.

"Look!" Cried Elliot, one of Eugene's friends. "It's startin'!"

In one massive movement, every child on the floor scrambled to their feet and raced across the floor to the windows, smushing their faces against the glass. Elliot swung the windows out so everyone could see the sky. Tonight was the princess's birthday, so the kingdom was celebrating by throwing off the lanterns. Eugene didn't particularly care for the holiday, but it put the kids in a good mood so he was in a good mood. He jumped up to sit beside Elliot in the window and watched as the golden colors of the lanterns flew away.

"Do you really think so?" Elliot asked.

"Think what?" Eugene didn't look away.

"Think that the princess is still out there."

Eugene thought about it for a minute. Then he shook his head. "Nah, not really. That'd make it too easy. Life's not a fairy tale, bub."

Elliot chuckled darkly, breaking off into a string of coughs. "Yeah. Ain't that the truth."

\* \* \*

><p>Flynn Rider had to get rid of the irrelevant memory. This was seriously <em>not<em> the time to be thinking up sappy memories from his childhood.

His thick leather boots pounded on the ground and he clutched his satchel close to his chest, running for, well, his life. They really should write a book about 'How to Be a Loveable Thief'. He figured he could be printed on the cover of that. Chapter one, be handsome (check!). Chapter two, find a scary team (check). Chapter three, steal something, preferably valuable (check). Chapter four, betray said scary group, take whatever you stole, and run from the guards through a thick forest hoping to loose them. All of them. Everyone.

Flynn supposed maybe it wasn't healthy to make so many enemies, but hey, with a face like this he could deal with the consequences. He could smirk and send a dozen ladies swooning. He could. He's done it before.

But at the moment, there were no ladies here. Just trees, violent thugs who now hate him, and palace guards who wanted to kill him. Yep. Just a normal day for Flynn Rider.

Except for the horse. The horse was new.

The guard riding it was easy enough to take care of. All Flynn had to do was kick him off. Then he was nice and in the saddle and there was nothing left to worry about!

Well . . . until the horse started acting . . . not horse-like. It

gave Flynn the scariest glare a horse had ever given him, then started snapping at his satchel with it's teeth! Sure it was a palace horse, but since when did the guards teach their horses to act like guard dogs?

Flynn and the horse fought for the bag for a few moments, before the horse managed to snag the leather with his teeth. "Stop! No! Bad horse!" Flynn scolded, stretching the strap as he struggled. "Give it back! Give it-"

The bag slipped out of the horse's teeth and snapped backwards, flying out of Flynn's hands. He and the horse sat there, watching it soar through the air. For a split second he swore it was about to end up at the bottom of a cliff, gone forever . . . until a tree sticking out of the edge snagged it on a small and weak-looking branch.

Flynn and the horse looked at each other.

Then the thief was shoved against the horse and jumped off, racing for the satchel. It was bad enough that horses are naturally faster than humans, so that was certainly no help in this situation. He managed to grab the horse's leg and knock it over, giving him more of an advantage. Until the stupid horse grabbed his boot and tripped him. The horse got ahead of him and landed on the tree's trunk, not at all unsteady on the small space. Flynn grit his teeth and jumped on it's back, but the horse knocked him off.

Somehow he managed to cling to the underside of the tree. But then, of course, the horse had to start trying to stomp on his hands and feet. Flynn smirked, quickly shimmying across the underside of the tree. It was no problem of his! Eugene had a habit of crawling on the support beams of-

He got to the satchel first and grabbed, turning back to the horse triumphantly. "Ha!" He cried. In your face, stupid horse!

Snap.

. . . aaaaaannnd now they were falling. Pretty fast too. He and the horse looked at each other one more time before they both started screaming. On the bright side, he was going to die pretty and rich. That's a plus.

The tree they clung to hit an outcropping and snapped in two, sending Flynn falling to the left and the horse to the right. The tree hit the ground first, so all Flynn suffered was a scrape or two on his arms and knees. He stumbled to his feet and shook his head, shaking leaves and twigs out of his hair.

He opened the flap and smirked at the beautiful sparkliness inside. Good, still there!

He turned around.

Big, black and scales. Narrowed green eyes and sharp teeth the size of his fingers. Breath that smelled like charred fish blew against his face. Flynn tilted his head upward, up and up and up.

The monster leaned down and snuffed smoke at him through it's nose. It growled and Flynn pulled the satchel against his chest. First a

guard horse. Now a guard \_dragon?\_ This was just ridiculous.

"Nae! Toothless dinnae hurt the man!"

The dragon, which was in \_no\_ way toothless, backed away at the command of a girl with hair like a madwoman. Neon orange and twice the size of her head, going off in every direction. The dragon nuzzled against her face, making her giggle and pat him. "Are ye alright?" She asked him, making Flynn blink a few times.

"Uh," He tried, because he wasn't sure if he could move yet. The kid looked up at him, squinting at him a little bit. Her face looked a little familiar, now that he was staring at it. "Y-yeah?"

She grinned. "Beauty."

Another kid, this one thin and awkward, came walking out of the bushes, rubbing his head and wearing the weirdest leather vest Flynn had ever seen. He had a wild sprinkling of freckles across his nose and short auburn hair, looking a lot more normal than his friend did. "Who's this?"

"Dinnae ken." The girl said, petting the dragon like it was an oversized cat. "He just appeared a minute ago."

The boy frowned slightly. Flynn offered a weak grin. If it were just the two kids it would have been one hell of a lot easier to get out of here, but that dragon was still eyeing him. Dragon. These kids had a dragon. Pinch him. Please. Please wake him up now.

Flynn heard the telltale sign of the horse not too far away, and that jarred him in the back enough to get over his shock about the dragon. He cursed to himself, making the girl's eyes widen and the boy's to narrow. "Headed somewhere in a hurry?" He remarked dryly.

"Kinda," Flynn grinned.

The horse leaped out of the bushes and whinnied like it was a beast roaring. The dragon made a face like it was raising an eyebrow like 'really? you're running from this?' Flynn mentally told the dragon to shut up.

The horse came at him and Flynn yelped, running in the other direction. That of course just sent him bowling into the brown-haired kid, knocking them both over.

"\_Really?\_" The kid shouted, trying to shove Flynn off of him. "Why does \_everybody\_ fall on \_me?\_"

The girl gasped and the horse came at them. Flynn grabbed the boy by his collar and heaved him up. "Don't just lay there! Run!" He dragged the boy behind him and ignored his disgruntled yell, only focusing on trying to get away from the homicidal horse.

"Hiccup!" The girl shouted, and the dragon roared.

Flynn ran into the trees, still dragging the kid while the horse and the girl and the dragon chased them. Flynn took a sharp right and dragged the boy behind a rock with him, covering his mouth when he tried to shout. "Stay still!" Flynn hissed, and the kid went slack

beside him.

For several long, tense moments, they listened to the horse on the other side of the boulder. Flynn only relaxed when he heard the sound of hooves stomping off in the other direction. He sided and let the kid go. He shoved on Flynn's hand and stumbled away, brushing at the front of himself. "What in the name of Thor was that for?" He snapped.

Flynn didn't know who Thor was, but hey, the kid made a rhyme! "Sorry," Flynn rolled his eyes, pulling the satchel's strap over his head so it went across his body.

The kid glared at him and Flynn fixed his hair. He looked around. "Hey, where'd your girlfriend go?" He asked easily.

The kid flushed so pink his freckles disappeared. He opened his mouth and furrowed his eyebrows, but didn't get to say anything because it was about then that Flynn got smacked in the face with a tree branch. "OW!

The girl from before appeared once Flynn could see again, holding a branch with leaves like it was a sword. "Just what kind o' game you playing?" She demanded, her voice weighed down by an accent so thick he could only blink at her with deadpan confusion.

"Ah canoot oonderstaynd a wuid yoo're sayin'." Flynn mimicked her accent, getting an icy narrow-eyed glare. The boy put a hand on her shoulder like he was trying to calm her.

"Easy, Merida," He pulled her away by her shoulder and the girl reluctantly lowered her wooden 'sword'. "Where's Toothless?"

"Distracting yer horse." She muttered, still sending Flynn dirty looks.

"Ah," Flynn smiled. "Thank you!"

"He's nae doing it for ye," The girl snapped. "I asked him too cause ye kidnapped Hiccup!"

"Merida." The boy muttered, blushing a little again. "It's okay."

"Hmph." She tossed her head and sent her curls everywhere. Flynn raised an eyebrow at their interaction. Yeah. Kids were definitely dating. Or they were siblings. Or something. "Well, now that we've distracted yer horse, ye can leave now."

Flynn fixed his vest. "Aye," He smirked, because for some reason it was just funny to make this girl angry. "I'll be leaving now."

He stepped away from the strange twosome and made to walk off. He had the crown, he was far away from the scary people he betrayed, and their pet dragon was not about to eat his beautiful face! Yup. Looked like everything was A-okay from here on out!

Of course, following the pattern of the day, he just had to find one more thing that didn't make any rational sense whatsoever. He

took one step away from the two kids before she saw the little blue thingy, floating there like it was a little dainty fairy. He stared at it and it stared at him, flickering like smoke. It floated backwards, waving smoke at him like it was waving arms for him to . . . follow it?

"Right. Leaving now!"

Flynn turned on his heel to walk the other direction, but in that direction he heard a whinnie, and roar, and the sound of a tree falling. He turned right back around again.

"Okay, not leaving now!"

The girl ignored him, stepping forward and squinting at the little . . . thing. "A wisp," She whispered, then walked forward. The misty thing vanished, but another appeared behind it, leading the red headed girl toward . . . a wall. Of rocks.

"Merida, what are you," The boy started.

She gave him a grin. "It's alright, Hiccup. Follow me."

"Follow you?" Flynn asked incredulously. "Follow you where? Those things are heading right toward-"

The girl disappeared behind a curtain of leaves and vines. Flynn and the kid stared at the spot she was a minute ago before the kid ran forward. "Not again- \_Merida!\_"

Keh. Again. That made him snicker. Well, the kids were gone, so he might as well just . . .

The blue smoke appeared, only once this time, and waved at him from directly in front of the leaves. Flynn stared at it, then at the leaf-curtains, then down again. Well, it's not like he had anything better to do. And it beat getting arrested.

Shrugging, Flynn stepped forward and pulled aside the leaves. "Hey!" He called into the dark cave behind it. "Where did you guys go?"

He saw a light at the end of the cave, and decided that it was the way out again. He followed it and came up behind the two kids, who were standing shoulder to shoulder with their heads craned up. "What are you . . . looking at?" He followed their gazes.

Reaching high into the sky, backlit by the morning sunlight and a rushing waterfall, stood a tall, almost regal looking tower.

"Well." Flynn remarked. "That's not something you see every day."

It had to have been seventy feet high- maybe more. It was built out of stone and brick, but the top most part was built out of wood. It had a small window with closed shutters and potted plants facing them. Before Flynn's eyes the little blue things drifted out of the grass, floating and beckoning them forward.

The girl walked toward the tower without a pause, moving like a woman on a mission. "Merida, wait!" The boy snapped, going after her. "We have to wait for Tooth- are you listening to me?"

Flynn shrugged and followed them aimlessly. Least he was getting entertainment from all this.

The girl stopped at the foot of the tower, her head tilted back to look all the way up. The smokey things were trailing up the side in a completely straight line. The girl pulled back the sleeves on her gray dress- yikes, talk about a fashion disaster. Did she run through a mudfight in that thing?-and grabbed onto the stones. Then she started to climb, completely at ease despite her skirt. Flynn tilted his head to the side. "She do that often?" He asked.

The boy rubbed his forehead. "You have no idea."

"C'mon, Hiccup!" The girl called. Flynn didn't think his eyebrow could get any higher or his smirk could get any wider.

"Your name is \_Hiccup\_?" He asked, feeling bad for the unfortunate name but still highly amused.

'Hiccup' gave him a narrow-eyed look. "Yeah. Laugh. Everyone does."

Flynn couldn't help it, he laughed. Hey, it wasn't like the kid didn't give him permission! The kid ignored his chortling and started after his girlfriend, trying to call her back down. The girl, Merida, pretty much ignored him. "Great." He huffed.

"Ha ha, have fun with that!" Flynn waved his hand and moved to turn away.

"That horse is still probably out there." The kid pointed out wryly. "He can probably smell you."

Flynn snorted. "That's stupid, horses can't . . . " He trailed off, thinking about all the things that horse had already done that horses couldn't do. He twitched with annoyance. "I don't care, I'm not climbing that stupid tower." Hiccup gave him a look. "Ugh. Do I have to?"

"Unless you want my dragon to eat you."

Flynn watched the kid from the corner of his eye. He seemed serious. "Alright, alright, I'll climb the stupid tower."

Hiccup smirked. Damn brat. He was just doing this to get back at him for the whole 'falling-on-him-then-dragging-him-across-the-forest' thing, wasn't he? The kid walked toward the tower and looked up. Ginger was a little more than half-way to the top. He put his hands on the bricks and stones, a lot less confident than she was. Flynn watched unimpressed as he slipped only two feet off the ground. " . . . you've never mountain climbed before, have you?" He asked, deadpan.

"Never had to." The kid grumbled. Flynn rolled his eyes.

He gave the kid a few sarcastic pointers and earned a firm "Shut up" each time. Sheesh, couldn't a guy try and help? Once he got about ten feet off the ground Flynn pulled out two of the arrows the guards had shot at him. He wasn't sure why he kept them, but now they would come

in handy. Using the arrows like portable hand holds, Flynn followed the two weird kids up into the tower. The kid got to the top before him only because of his head start, but within moments all three of them were inside.

Ginger looked around. "There's nae a soul," She remarked with a light frown, looking like she was greatly confused.

"That's weird," Hiccup muttered. "Because it really looks like somebody lives up h-"

"HICCUP!" Ginger yelped.

"Wha-?"

\_Clang.\_

#### 4. Three: Not Leaving This Tower

**\*\*Hey ya'll, Angel here. Sorry this is a bit behind schedule, but I've had a lot on my plate the last few days. I've been helping my family and my fellow bridesmaids set up for my aunt's wedding shower, so again, I apologize. I've also accidentally found myself watching Treasure Planet the other night and dammit, Jim is adorable -- I'll try and control myself, but keep your eyes out for a \_maybe\_ Jimbo cameo. It won't be in this chapter and maybe not the next, but you never know!**  
><strong>

**\*\*One of you guys asked me if I would do more fanart for this fic. Would anyone else be into that? If you have any sorts of requests (within reason of course) I'll see what I can do. But enough about me! We have a fic to read, don't we?\***

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter Three<strong>: Never Leaving This Tower.

\* \* \*

><p><em>~Corona~<em>

Rapunzel squeaked in terror and ducked behind her dress dummy. Her breath was coming out in scared little puffs and she clutched her weapon of choice (a frying pan, she didn't really have anything else on hand at the moment) against her chest. Hesitantly, she peaked her head out from behind the dummy and took another long look at the three now unconscious people laying on the floor.

The first one was a form and shape she new the best. It was a girl, younger and a little smaller than Rapunzel. She resembled mother, but only because her hair was so curly and her eyes were so blue. But mother's hair was much more tame than this girl's. Mother's hair was perfect and every curve and turn was in the exact right spot. This girl . . . her hair was much longer, nearly all the way down her back but in such tight curly-ques that if it were straight, it just might reach the floor! And mother always kept her dresses in primed and perfect. This girl's dress was torn every which way and dirty like she went rolling down a hill covered in grass and flowers.



Unconsciously, Rapunzel's fingers twitched with the urge to mend that dress. Or even make a new one! Yes, and oh goodness all the colors she could use! Purple? Goodness no! That wouldn't do . . . red like mother's? No no, red was mother's color . . .

Forcing herself out of her creative state, Rapunzel spared a cautious glance toward the other two, bigger and with less curves than the female. Chewing her lip, Rapunzel inched toward the girl. She poked her cheek with the handle of the frying pan and squeaked away again, but the girl didn't move. Even from a few feet away Rapunzel could see that a small bruise was beginning to blossom on the place where she brained the poor girl with her frying pan.

Contented with herself that the girl wasn't going to wake up, Rapunzel steeled herself to move onto the . . . men.

Both laid crumpled on the floor, falling much less ceremoniously than the girl did. One was small and thin like the girl, with pale skin and dark-but-lightish colored hair. He was dressed oddly, in thick cloth and furs. Was he cold all the time? Rapunzel wondered why anyone would be so cold here. It was always nice and comfortably warm in the tower . . . but these people were from the \_outside.\_ What did she know about the outside?

Remembering this, Rapunzel took a step back from them all. Even as soft as the girl looked there was no telling what they came here to do to her.

That's right, Rapunzel realized. They had to have come here for a reason . . .

She gave the first two of the three nervous looks, and finally turned her eyes on the last male. He was everything that the first boy wasn't. He was tall and thickly built where the other boy was willowy and small. His hair was darker too, some of it covering his eyes. Using the handle of her pan again, Rapunzel timidly stepped forward and flipped the hair out of his face.

Her eyebrows furrowed. He certainly didn't \_look\_ like a ruffian . . . or a thug. He actually looked kind of . . . nice. His skin was a gentle tanned color and his face was relaxed, even though his unconsciousness came from . . . less than desirable methods. Rapunzel looked to Pascal, shrugging and utterly confused.

He scurried over to the place on the floor where mother had painted a picture of what men looked like. He sat himself beside the scowling portrait and turned himself red, imitating the fangs sticking out of the man's mouth. \_Men with pointy teeth . . .\_

Well, she supposed that made sense. Mother told her once that pretty things are usually very dangerous. Sometimes that really \_didn't\_ make sense, since mother was beautiful and she was just fine . . . but mother didn't say beautiful, did she? She said pretty. \_Pretty things were dangerous, but beautiful things were harmless. Yes, now it all made sense!

But the man on the floor was pretty. He was nice to look at, like the paintings she was so proud of. So with the handle, Rapunzel inched forward and probed at his cheek, pulling it back so she could see his razor . . . flat teeth. Yeah. They were flat. All of them.

Rapunzel looked at Pascal. He only shrugged, confused as she was. The little chameleon ran to the other boy and pointed at him. Carefully, Rapunzel checked his teeth too. But alas, his teeth were just as flat as the first man's was. That was strange. Could mother have possibly been . . . wrong?

Rapunzel abruptly shook off such a blasphemous thought. No, mother would never lie to her! Mother probably didn't know that there were men in the \_outside\_ that didn't have pointy teeth. Yes, that was it.

But now came the next question . . . what was she supposed to \_do\_ with these people?

\* \* \*

><p>It took some maneuvering, but Rapunzel finally managed to find a way to hide all three of them.<p>

Rapunzel decided on putting them all in her wardrobe, simply because it was the biggest closed space she had and it was least likely that mother would look inside randomly. The girl wasn't too hard. She wasn't heavy but her hair got \_everywhere\_. \_For one terrible moment their hair got tangled together and Rapunzel was worried she'd have to cut one of the girl's many curls to free herself. But that would be rude, so she really didn't want to do it, but luckily the tangle undid itself when Rapunzel finally set the girl down on the bottom of the wardrobe. She propped her up so she was simply sitting, leaning against the corner of the wardrobe.

Rapunzel nodded, satisfied. Her eyes drifted to the girl's dress, fingers again twitching with the urge to sew and cut and- She forced her gaze away, back to the two on the floor still. Mother would be back at some point. She had to get them all hidden before she came home.

She crossed her arms and furrowed her eyebrows, thinking. Both boy and man were bigger than the girl was, and even she had been a bit of a challenge. Rapunzel tugged a lock of her hair, and then she got an idea.

She tied her hair around the smaller boy, using it like a rope or a tether to drag him toward the wardrobe with the girl. In one movement she grabbed him by her underarms and heaved him up, laying him awkwardly across the girl with his head under her chin and his gangly arms and legs all over the place. It wasn't perfect but hey, she got him there, right?

Rapunzel brushed her hands off on her skirt and turned her head toward the other man, still limp and unconscious on the floor in front of the window. She rolled up her sleeves. Time for the hard part.

She tried dragging him. She tried pushing him in. That worked, for two seconds, and then he fell out and landed on top of her. She tried to swing him in, but her hair got stuck in the doors. She whacked her head against the door, frustrated.

Finally though, with her hair and a broom and a chair, she managed to

get all three of them inside the wardrobe and the door shut. Sure she \_may\_ have crushed a few fingers in the process, but that was besides the point. The point was that she had people in her closet.

"Okay," Rapunzel said, breathing heavily and pointing her frying pan at doors. "I've got people in my closet. I've got people . . . in my closet." She turned over her shoulder and looked at herself in the mirror. "I have got \_people\_ in my \_closet!\_" She laughed, finally realizing what that means. Three people had come up into the tower, something mother had been telling her to be afraid of since she was little. And she hadn't been scared! Well . . . maybe she was a \_little\_ scared . . . but she did it! She had been able to handle herself just fine!

"How about that? Don't think I can handle myself, huh mother?" Rapunzel chuckled to herself. She spun her pan around her fingers. "Well, heh, tell that to my frying pa- Ow!" She hit herself in the forehead by accident. She held the spot and glared at her pan, until something behind her caught her eye.

Rapunzel spotted a bag by the window. It was small and made of leather, must have belonged to one of the three people because it certainly wasn't her's. She turned so she was looking at it directly. It was half way open, and something small and shiny was sticking out of the opening at the top. She grabbed the shiny thing and held it up to look at it.

It was small and round, with one side that was all pointy and covered in tiny little stones. Three were bigger than the others, clear and shimmering. Rapunzel held the clear stones up to her eyes, looking through it at Pascal on the floor. The chameleon looked thoughtful before shaking his head. That's not what it was for then. It was round, so, maybe it was a bracelet. She stuck her hand through the hoop and let go, leaving it hanging off her arm. She looked to Pascal but he shook his head again. Okay, not a bracelet either.

Rapunzel took it off and looked at it again, chancing another look in the mirror. The hoop was about the size of her head, she supposed . . . maybe it was a . . . hat?

Checking herself in the mirror, Rapunzel reached up and lightly placed the shiny hoop on top of her blond hair, facing the stones outward. She stared at herself, hesitantly lowering her hands. There was something strange going through her expression right then. Something she should have known. Like a memory . . . or a dream. Something from a long time ago . . . a feeling that made something deep inside her . . . shift? What \_was\_ \_this\_ . . . thing?

She chanced another glance at Pascal, but alas, he shook his head. So it wasn't a hat after all. Shoot. She thought . . . she thought she was right about it . . . oh well, she supposed.

"Rapunzel!"

\_Mother!\_

She started, pulling the hoop off her head. She grabbed the bag and threw them into a nearby pot, running quickly to the window and pushing the doors open again. Down below stood mother, her face with

a large smile as she waited to come up. "Coming mother!" Rapunzel called, throwing her hair over the hook then letting the rest of it fly out the window, falling all the way to the ground. Mother grabbed her hair and so did Rapunzel, pulling her up just like she did every day.

"I've got a surprise for you!" Mother called lovingly.

Rapunzel giggled nervously, glancing at her wardrobe. "Uh, I do to!"

"I bet my surprise is bigger!" Mother teased.

"I seriously doubt it!" Rapunzel mumbled, suddenly a lot more nervous than before.

She finally got mother to the top of the tower, where she perched on the windowsill and held up her basket with a wide smile. "I brought back parsnips! I'm making hazelnut soup for dinner, your favorite! Surprise!"

Hazelnut soup! Mother hardly ever liked to cook! Any other day Rapunzel would have squealed and danced across the floor with glee, but right now she had, eh, a bit more on her mind. "Well, Mother," Rapunzel pulled her hair off the window hook and smiled. "There's something I wanna tell you, an-"

"Oh Rapunzel," Mother sighed, hanging her cloak on the coat rack by the window. "You know how I hate leaving you after a fight . . . especially when I've done absolutely nothing wrong."

Rapunzel bit her lip. She knew mother was right, but once she knew what she'd done she'd be so proud she'd have to let her outside! Even if just for a little while. "Okay, but, I've been thinking a lot about what you said earlier, and-"

"I hope you're not still talking about the stars," Mother said with a tone of warning in her voice, crossing the room to start unpacking her basket with the things she needed to make dinner.

"Floating lights," Rapunzel corrected. "And yes, I'm leading up to that," She walked proudly toward the wardrobe, ready to show mother and have her be so proud!

"Because I really thought we'd dropped the issue, sweetheart." Mother continued, her back to Rapunzel and the wardrobe.

"No, mother," Rapunzel pleaded, just trying to move the conversation along so she could show her the people she'd not only subdued, but captured! "I'm just saying, you think I'm not strong enough to handle myself out there, but-"

"Oh, darling," Mother chuckled, looking at her over her shoulder. "I know you're not strong enough to handle yourself out there."

"But if you just-"

"Rapunzel," A clear warning now. "We're done talking about this."

"Trust me-"

"Rapunzel."

"I know what I'm-"

"Rapunzel!"

"Oh come on, I-"

"\_Enough\_ with the lights, Rapunzel!" Mother shouted suddenly. "You are \_not\_ leaving this tower! \_Ever!\_"

Rapunzel froze, taken completely aback by mother raising her voice like that. Mother only shouted when she was doing something very wrong . . . something that she did not approve of. Slowly, Rapunzel pulled her hand away from the chair holding her wardrobe shut.

Mother groaned, falling delicately into a nearby chair. "Great," She propped her head up on her hand, sighing. "Now \_I'm \_the bad guy . .  
."

Rapunzel felt terrible. Not only had she angered mother, but she made her shout at her. Mother hated to shout . . . she said it wasn't a lady-like thing to do. All she'd wanted was for her to listen for a little while, just a few minutes . . . but mother just wouldn't. She guessed that she figured the world was just too dangerous, even if Rapunzel herself thought she'd be fine.

She couldn't try to keep asking now. She'd only make mother feel worse.

Rapunzel's eyes drifted to the wardrobe with the three sleeping people, then to the painting above the fireplace. The painting, filled with her longing, her hopes and her dreams . . . of the girl with the long, magical hair sitting serene and happy, watching the floating lights as they danced across the dark blue sky.

It was then that Rapunzel got an idea. A terrible, horrible idea, that would not only get herself into the worst kind of trouble imaginable, but it went against everything mother had ever tried to teach her. If mother wouldn't take her to see the floating lights, then maybe . . . just maybe . . .

"All I was going to say, mother, is that . . . " She stepped in front of the wardrobe, pulling her hair along with her so the fact that the chair was propped against it wouldn't be seen. "I know what I want for my birthday, now."

Mother sighed. "And what is that?" She asked, not looking up at her.

Rapunzel held her arms across herself. " . . . new paint?" She offered. "Made from . . . the white shells you once brought me?"

"Well that is a very long trip, Rapunzel," Mother lowered her hand and finally looked at her again. "Almost three days' time."

"I just . . . thought it was a better idea than," Rapunzel glanced at the painting again. " . . . than the . . . stars."

Mother looked down thoughtfully, then sighed. She smiled softly, and stood up. She walked toward Rapunzel and held her in her arms. "You're sure you'll be all right on your own?" She asked gently.

"I know I'm safe as long as I'm here," Rapunzel replied, smiling when mother kissed the top of her head.

They pulled away in a few moments, mother going to get her cloak again and Rapunzel reaching to pack her basket with enough supplies for a long journey. She gave mother her basket, and after a soft fairwell, Rapunzel gently lowered mother to the ground with her hair again.

"I'll be back in three days' time," Mother assured her. "Oh, I love you very much dear."

"I love you more." Rapunzel smiled, waving goodbye.

"I love you most."

Rapunzel stood in the window, watching Mother's familiar comforting figure disappear through the cave. She stood still, counting to ten in her head, just to make double-sure that mother wasn't going to come back because she forgot anything. Once Rapunzel was positive mother was completely gone, she pushed away from the window and scrambled to grab her frying pan again, ready to put her terribly wonderful plan into motion.

## 5. Four: So Not Fair

**\*\*Hey all! I'm back from vacation and I come with a gift: THE FINISHED CHAPTER! Oh yes. Thanks for all of you who were waiting so patiently! I love you! I've replaced the whole chapter (I think) and it should be longer now! So, I'll stop prattling on now and just let you all read at your own paces! Love and reviews and all that fun stuff.**  
><strong>

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter Four<strong>: So Not Fair

\* \* \*

><p>Her head hurt. Terribly. Worse than her head hurt the day she found out what tradition that <em>beast<em> expected her to follow through with. It was a bursting ache, leaving her mind scrambled and difficult to think through. She had a hard time opening her eyes, let alone lifting her head. There was also something on her chest, heavy, weighing her down. There were noises. Voices. A shout and a quiet whimper. Whatever weighed her down moved. Sighed. So soft . . . so warm . . .

\* \* \*

><p>Merida groaned, half in pain and half in discomfort. Where she

laid now was not at all as comfortable as it was when she was last conscious . . . or maybe half conscious. She wasn't sure. Maybe that was all a dream? What would explain why she couldn't quite remember where she was? Of course that could always be the concussion too . . .  
<p>

Nonetheless, she was awake now. And as an active person, Merida didn't much like to stay in one place for too long. That even included when she first woke up. So even though her thoughts were muddled and her movements were sluggish, Merida somehow managed to push herself up off the floor . . . or wherever she was.

"Hiccup . . . ?" She slurred, looking around the large but unfamiliar room. "Toothless . . . ?"

She hadn't been traveling with them long by now, only several days at the most. But even then her mind went quickly to her new friends. She never went very far from either of them, and the two stuck to each other like they were two cloths woven together, so this was the first time in a while Merida was completely alone.

She shook the thought off. \_M'fine by me'self.\_ Instead of worrying, she looked around again. The room was large, larger than her parents' chamber back at Dun'Broch. And instead of having blank stone walls, this room was covered floor-to-ceiling in colorful paintings. Paintings done by smaller hands progressively becoming larger hands, but never older hands.

There were flowers and stars, dancing fae creatures and swirls twisting tighter than one of her own curls. Merida scratched her head, tossing some hair out of her face. Normally this action would have come as second nature to her, but a split second later Merida realized with a start that . . . this was not her own hair.

It was a golden yellow, like the shine of the Fire Falls only she dared to drink from. A lovely color, indeed, but that didn't explain why she was covered in \_hair that was not her own!\_

Merida, overcome with a sudden fleeting moment of disgust, shoved all the hair off of her as quick as she could and scuttled backwards across the floor to get away from it. From her new vantage point against the wall, Merida could now stare at the blond hair and wonder where on earth it could have come from.

"You're awake!" A delighted voice called cheerfully.

Merida snapped her ice blue eyes upward, finding the owner of the voice rather easily. She was sitting on the other side of the room at a low table, needle and thread in one hand and a bolt of dark earthen green fabric in the other. She was tall and slender, looking far too thin and too pale for a girl her age. Her face was round, but had a tapered chin and a small nose, with large green eyes like she was eternally a wee lass.

As the girl stood up, so too went her hair, which was long and blond and . . . reached the floor. Not only the did it reach the floor, but it collected in a pile at her feet, then led off across the room to where Merida sat, and even longer still for it reached past her and off into the darker parts of the room. Merida followed the hair with her eyes, a natural curiosity prompting her to try and find where on

earth the ends were.

Following the hair, Merida came across something that startled her. Sitting back-to-back on a blue chair and a stool, were the stranger from the woods and Hiccup, respectively. Tied up in the hair. Completely unconscious.

"Hiccup!" Merida yelped, scrambling to her feet to run to his side. She grabbed his drooping shoulders, shaking him, trying to wake him up. "Are ye alright? Hiccup? Can ye hear me?!"

"Oh, please," The girl cried, hurrying over. "Don't freak out! It's okay, really, it's-"

Merida recoiled from the girl- some kind of fae creature, she had to be! Luring them all up here to trap them in her hair, like a spider's web! No human lass would have hair like that! Longer than even her mother's! Desperate to defend herself, her friend and . . . whoever that guy was, Merida reached out to a nearby table and came back with a small kitchen knife. She placed herself between the girl and her friend, grabbing a handful of the golden hair and readying herself to slice through it, slice through it all, when the girl screamed, loud and shrill and . . . just as terrified as Merida was.

"No!" She begged, her hands out like she wanted to pull Merida away but too scared to come any closer. Her bright green eyes were locked on the knife in Merida's hands. "Please, please, don't- don't do that . . . don't cut my hair, oh please . . . "

Merida looked from the girl, to the knife, to the hair holding Hiccup captive. " . . . why?" She asked slowly, cautious.

The girl chewed on her lower lip nervously. She timidly held out her hand, looking shy and ashamed and still terribly scared. Merida narrowed her eyes and looked warningly at Hiccup then back.

"I wasn't going to hurt them . . . or you, honest," She pleaded. "I just . . . I didn't know why you were here and I . . . I just . . . "

Merida lowered the knife, then sighed. How could she hold a knife to a girl who looked like she was ready to break down in tears any second? Reluctantly, Merida handed her the knife. The girl gave her a watery smile and immediately set the knife back down on the table. Merida raised an eyebrow. If she had any malignant feelings toward them, then what she just did was pretty . . . stupid.

"Why . . . " Merida said slowly, frowning at this little pale thing. Why would the wisps lead them here? Even the stranger's fate led him here. What was it about her? Made her so special? "Why can't I cut yer hair?"

Her face paled and she looked scared all over again. She stared at Merida and Merida stared back, waiting for an answer she wasn't sure was coming. After a while of silence Merida huffed and blew a curl out of her eyes. Maybe this whole 'change her fate' thing wouldn't be so easy after all . . .

"Ah, um, yes!" The girl said, getting Merida's attention again. She took her hand and led her toward the table she was sitting at. "I was



waiting for you all to wake up, and, I made you something!"

Merida made a surprised face. "What?"

The girl beamed and grabbed the green cloth off the table with a flourish. "It's been sooo long since I've gotten the chance to make something new! Usually I just mend things, but I saw your dress and I just had to jump to the call, you know? Hee hee!" She burst into a fit of giggles that confused Merida more than anything. "And oh, I didn't mean to be rude, of course, I just figured you might-" She held the dress up so Merida could look at it. "Want a new one!"

Merida blinked. And then she blinked again.

The dress that the girl made was more of a skirt and a top, the same color as the leaves on the trees back home. A dark luxurious green color, like her favorite woolen dress. Merida reached out to touch the cloth, feel it between her fingers. It wasn't nearly as heavy as wool, but thicker than the silk she currently wore. The trim was a yellowish orange gold color, like the girl's hair, or a sunset. It had long sleeves. Maybe it would be thick enough to protect against a drawstring catching on her arm?

"Do you like it?" The girl whispered hopefully.

"A-aye . . . " Merida replied, unsure. The girl giggled.

"I've never heard anyone talk like you do. Your voice is all . . . funny."

Merida chuckled. "Aye, but, to me, it's yer voice that sounds funny."

The two of them giggled softly for a moment. Merida shook the smile off and turned her head away. It was a nice dress . . . but that didn't make her forget the fact that this girl still held her friend (and the other guy) captive. She took a step away. "If ye are nae gonna hurt us, then let my friends free."

The girl looked nervous again and put the dress down. "I . . . I can't."

"Why?"

"I just can't!" The girl snapped. "Because- because if I let them go they- they'll take me away! Cut off all my hair and- and- I just-I can't!" She took Merida's hands and bent her knees a bit to be eye level. "Please, please understand, I can't let them go until I know for certain they won't hurt me!"

Merida frowned slightly. "If yer so afraid of us hurtin' ye . . . why didnae you tie me up as well?"

The girl looked startled. She looked from Merida to Hiccup and the other guy, then back. "Ah, well . . . I . . . I don't know . . . " She chewed on her thumb nail nervously. "B-but I was right about it, though. You don't want to hurt me, right? You put the knife down, right?"

"Aye," Merida crossed her arms then held her forehead, massaging a growing lump on her temple. It was messing with her thoughts, making it hard for her to think. She should be angry with this girl. Angry that she'd attacked them all without warning, out of nowhere. Then again . . . they had pretty much broken into this tower, her home . . .

The girl held up the dress again and Merida found her eyes drawn back to it. The girl giggled. "I think these colors look good with your hair. What do you think?"

Dresses were not Merida's strong suit. The wisps could not have led them all here simply because she needed a new dress, right? "I . . . suppose me dress is a bit . . . " She picked at a mud stain on her shoulder. " . . . clarty."

"Clarty!" The girl giggled. "So many new words!" She beckoned to Merida with a finger. "Follow me, I can help you put it on."

Merida stepped forward when the girl started heading up the stairs, but she paused. What was she doing? Was she really about to let a complete stranger fashion her a new dress for nothing? To be clean again would be heavenly, and yet . . .

"Wait," Merida called to the girl, who paused half-way up to look back down at her. She blinked her doe-like eyes in innocent curiosity. " . . . yer nae gonna make me wear a corset . . . are ye?"

The girl just blinked again. "What's a corset?"

Merida pretty much followed her willingly after that.

\* \* \*

><p>" . . . at's not fair," Said an unfamiliar voice.<p>

Merida's quiet snickers. "Sorry," Her accent putting an oddly familiar spin on her words. "Dinnae have a choice."

"Hmph." Came the first voice again. "So, what'd you do with the other kid, Blondie?"

"He's tied to yer back."

"Did I ask you, Ginger?"

"Why ye wee devil, I aughta-!"

That was how Hiccup found himself waking up, to the sounds of voices and arguments. His mind came back to him slowly, reluctantly. He could open his eyes, but it was a while before he was really able to see what was going on around him. He could still hear Merida talking, and she didn't sound panicked, so Hiccup didn't panic yet. Instead he let himself slowly wake up so he wouldn't end up overwhelming himself.

" . . . Merida?" He mumbled, looking around for his red-headed friend. He could have sworn she was here, so then where . . . ?

"Oh look who joined the party!" The voice he didn't remember said sarcastically. Hiccup turned his head and shifted to rub his eye, but found himself to be unable to move. Well he could \_move\_, but he couldn't move \_much.\_

"Wha- . . . ?" Hiccup looked downward and found his arms bound against him with rope. He struggled, panic beginning to bloom inside his head. "What the Hel is this?!" He demanded, trying to fight his way out.

"H-hey!" The stranger snapped. "Stop that! You're squishing me!"

"Hush, ye!" Merida retorted smartly, coming around and into Hiccup's line of sight. His shoulders relaxed a little after seeing a familiar face. "It's alright, Hiccup," She assured him gently, patting his shoulder. "Ye can calm down."

"What's going on?" Hiccup asked. "Where- where are we? Where's Toothless?!"

Merida held up her hand, shushing him. "We're in the tower, remember? The wisps led us here. Donnae worry, we're safe."

"Speak for yourself," The stranger muttered. Hiccup craned his head around and found the guy from the woods to be sitting right behind him. He turned around too and nodded at the young viking. "Sup kid?" He asked with a cheeky but sarcastic grin.

Hiccup stared at him for a second then returned to Merida. " . . . please explain."

Merida scratched her neck through her curls. "Well, like I was saying . . . the wisps led us here, but when we got up here we accidentally scared Rapunzel and she, well, panicked."

"Rapunzel?"

"Hello!" A girl danced into his line of sight, coming up beside Merida and waving at him with a pleasant smile. Young and thin and blindingly blond, she almost radiated kittens and rainbows and sunshine. Hiccup stared at her for a second before fixing on her hair. It was longer than Merida's by far, reaching the floor and . . . hold on a second. He flicked his eyes from her hair to the rope tying him down, then back again. That wasn't rope . . .

"By the frickin' Gods!" Hiccup yelped, startling 'Rapunzel' into ducking behind Merida. "Is this your \_hair?!\_"

" . . . yes?" Rapunzel offered meekly, peaking around Merida's frizziness.

"Welcome to hell, my friend," The stranger from the woods remarked. "Welcome to hell."

Hiccup closed his eyes and took a deep breath, letting it out through his nose. Freaking out wouldn't help in this situation, no matter how much he felt like he wanted to. Instead, he focused on Merida, hoping she'd at least be able to help him keep his head. "Where's Toothless?" He asked again, and wasn't exactly reassured when her

face turned thoughtful.

"I kin he may still be in the forest . . . somewhere." She answered dismissively. If his hands weren't occupied Hiccup would have been rubbing his forehead in exasperation. Or strangling her. Well, if he absolutely needed the dragon Hiccup supposed he could just shout or whistle for the beast and he'd come. "But that's nae the current issue here," Merida continued, side-stepping to bring Rapunzel back into the conversation. "She has something to offer us."

"The answer is still no." The guy behind Hiccup muttered.

"No to what?" Hiccup really didn't like to be kept out of the loop.

"Rapunzel wants us to take her into the nearby Kingdom, Hiccup," Merida explained for the Viking's benefit. "For her eighteenth birthday, she wants to see a . . . what was it?"

"Lantern festival." The guy huffed.

"Aye!" Merida nodded. "A 'Lantern festival'!"

Hiccup blinked at her. " . . . and why would we do that?"

Merida grabbed the edges of her skirt, drawing Hiccup's attention down to it. Huh. What happened to the blue dirty one? Not that he was complaining, the new one was pretty nice . . . a green color that looked good compared to her hair, and it made her eyes look a little bit less blue and more greenish, and . . . what was he talking about again? "Well," Merida said, making him blink and snap his attention back to her. "She made me a new dress . . . see?"

Yes, Hiccup did see. He could see quite well. It was a very nice dress and . . . and . . . what was he thinking about again?

Merida smiled. The girl behind her peaked around her curls again, giving Hiccup the worst puppy-dog eyes after, well, Toothless. "Please?" She asked.

Hiccup hated the puppy-dog-eyes look. He hated it more than flying through a fireball a la Toothless. Even as he thought, he could feel his resolve slowly breaking down. Dammit, when exactly did he become such a softie?! "Look, Rapunzel," He began, trying not to look directly into her eyes. Geeze, could they get any bigger? "You seem like a . . . really nice girl and all . . . but-"

Her shoulders drooped just a little bit. Hiccup struggled to ignore this.

"Look, Merida and I, we . . . we don't really know the area that well." He explained to her as gently as he could. He wasn't sure he could handle tears at this point. "We're just passing through here, and, well . . . " He sighed. Merida turned to her new friend after he didn't try to continue and put a sympathetic hand on her shoulder.

"Hiccup's right," She agreed softly. "We don't kin this country. Some of the trees 'round here are, eh . . . I've never seen any of them before."

He had to admit, watching this girl nearly deflate was almost cruel, to both himself and to her. She had looked so hopeful . . . just like Merida did. No wonder he was having such a hard time saying no. He really \_was\_ becoming a softie, wasn't he?

Then the guy tied up against his back shifted, reminding Hiccup he was still there. "Hey," Hiccup said suddenly. "What was your name again?"

"Me?" The guy asked, sounding like he was totally bored with all of this.

"Yeah."

"Flynn Rider," He said smugly. "Thief and lady-killer extraordinaire."

"Yer a thief?!" Merida yelped, but Hiccup ignored her.

"Great. Thanks. And you live in this kingdom, right?"

" . . . yeah?" Not so smug now. Hiccup turned to Rapunzel with a smirk. He nodded back toward the guy, Flynn Rider.

"I'll bet he could get you to the lanterns." Hiccup remarked easily, looking at his fingernails nonchalantly. Or as nonchalantly as he could while his arms were tied to his sides. He glanced at Rapunzel just in time to watch her eyes light up in renewed excitement.

"\_Really?!\_" She squealed, bouncing on her toes a little bit.

"What?!" Flynn yelped.

"Really." Hiccup nodded.

"No!"

"Yes!" Merida cheered.

"Hello!" Flynn snapped. "Don't I get a say in this?!"

Hiccup and Merida answered at the same time: "No."

"This is \_SO\_ not fair!"

## 6. Five: When Your Life finally Begins

**\*\*Hei gais! Yeah, I know this is late (like, really, really late) but my computer decided that my old file for this story was corrupted, so I had to remake the whole master file and re-write this chapter. Which annoyed me, but none the less I am back and so are your favorite animated Disney idiots. Please enjoy reading this as much as I enjoyed writing it! Thank you all for the faves and the reviews! They remind me to get off my lazy ass because there are people out there waiting to read the crazy stuff I come up with when I'm bored. So, allons-y, READ!\*\***

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter Five: <strong>When Your Life (finally) Begins

\* \* \*

><p><em>~Corona~<em>

Rapunzel just couldn't believe her luck! Everything was going surprisingly her way. She wasn't sure what she was supposed to make of these strangers at first, but she was quick to figure out that none of them were here to steal her hair. Which honestly didn't make sense, because why wouldn't they be here for her hair? Merida assured her repeatedly that was not the case. Oh, Merida! Someone she could finally call a 'friend'! Merida was her friend now, right? Rapunzel knew her name and she put on the new dress- which looked great on her small frame! The bodice was just right and the skirt was loose enough to swish at her legs when she walked. Green like the Outside and yellow-orange like the sunset. Both looked great with her odd hair!

She was pretty lucky. After confiding in Merida her plan, and how she had to do it while mother was gone, her new friend was almost surprisingly helpful. Her pretty eyes narrowed and her small mouth pursed a little bit, before deciding almost seconds later with: "Aye, I'll hep yooo." Rapunzel loved the weird way she talked.

And once Merida agreed, Rapunzel figured that her friends would agree too. After they both woke up, she was pretty disappointed that Merida couldn't make the bigger man agree to their delemma. He called her floating lights a 'lantern thing', but at least Rapunzel learned that she was right. They weren't stars. Once the other smaller boy woke up though, it only took a couple of pleases and not as many pouts as she thought she'd need to get him to go with it. And with a few cleverly-placed words, he'd even managed to rope their elusive friend 'Flynn Rider' into it as well.

Or at least she thought. Now he was protesting the entire idea. Loudly.

"I never agreed to this!" Flynn snapped at Merida, who stood there with her arms crossed and her face barely interested. Hiccup, Merida's other friend with the odd name, who she seemed to like a bit more than Flynn, had fallen quiet now too, since everyone was in front of Flynn now and he was almost literally outside the group of conversation. "And since I, apparently, am the only one in here who knows anything about the Kingdom, what's stopping me from leading all of you into the woods and getting you lost forever?"

Rapunzel gasped a little bit at the threat. He wouldn't, would he?!

Hiccup spoke up for the first time in a few minutes. "Hey, didn't you have a bag or something when we got up here?"

That seemed to affect him. Flynn's brown eyes went wide and he looked down at himself before looking around wildly. "Oh-" He started, the word nearly falling out of his mouth. "Where- where is my satchel?!" He demanded.

Did he mean the brown bag with the shiny thing? Rapunzel was pretty sure it was still in that pot behind her somewhere. Flynn looked around a few more times but couldn't seem to find it, instead he focused on Merida with narrowed eyes and a frown. "Okay Ginger. What'd you do with it?"

Merida held up her hands, the picture of innocence. "I didnae touch it."

"You little-" Flynn tried to jump out of his seat, drawing a sharp 'Ow!' from Hiccup when he was smashed against the back of the chair. His tone nearly made Rapunzel duck behind Merida again, but for some reason the way the other girl was standing stuck with her. Rapunzel tried to copy her posture. Shoulders not drooped but merely relaxed. Weight even on both her feet. Arms crossed just-so across her chest. Head held up and only slightly tilted backwards. Suddenly, Flynn's voice alone didn't scare her anymore.

"Alright, Flynn Rider," Rapunzel declared, saying it loudly to make it sound braver than she actually felt. "I am . . . prepared to offer you a deal."

"You mean you took my satchel?" He asked, looking from her to Merida and back. Rapunzel nodded.

"Yes, and I've hidden it. Somewhere you'll never find it." She was proud of herself. Hidden away, never to be seen again, at least until he-

"It's in that pot, isn't it?" He asked, pointing to it off to the side.

Rapunzel held her hand out. Merida kindly placed her frying pan in her open palm.

"What are you-"

Clang.

\* \* \*

><p>After several minutes, some hysterical laughter from Hiccup and Pascal's tongue to Flynn's ear, the thief was awake again and not exactly happy. "Would you <em>stop that?!<em>" He demanded, trying to rub away the feeling of her chameleon's spit off his head. Rapunzel crossed her arms.

"Now I've hidden it, where you'll never find it." She remarked firmly, which is exactly what Merida told her to say. "Jerk."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me." Okay, so the last part was Hiccup's idea, but it felt oddly good to say it. Rapunzel held her head high (another quick tip from Merida) and refused to let his glare bother her. After a long stare-down, Flynn rolled his eyes and leaned back in his chair.

His face and voice were deadpan. "So this deal . . . ?"

"Yes." Rapunzel nodded as if he'd reminded her. "You say you know what the floating lights are? If you can take me, Merida, and Hiccup to the kingdom to see them, I will give you back your precious-" What did he call it again? "Satchel."

Flynn stared at her with one eyebrow raised, like he didn't believe her. "Okay, let me get this straight . . . I take you to see the lanterns, bring you back home, and I get my satchel back."

"I promise."

He looked skeptical. Strange, promises usually worked on mother.

"And when I promise something, I never, ever, break that promise. Ever." She added the extra ever on the end just for effect. It worked, right? Flynn's eyes narrowed a little bit and he sighed. Oh yay! Was he saying yes?!

"Alright Blondie," He began. "I didn't want to have to do this, but you leave me no choice." Okay. What was he talking about? "Here comes the smolder."

He lowered his head then raised it, this time with the strangest expression on his face. He'd pursed his lips and lowered his eyelids, gazing up at her through his eyelashes. He looked like when Pascal wanted a little bit of food off her plate. Innocent and begging. It didn't work on Rapunzel then so it wasn't going to work on her now.

"Really." Hiccup deadpanned.

Rapunzel narrowed her eyes and tried to imitate his glare. A few seconds later Flynn said, "This is kind of an off day for me, this doesn't usually happen." What doesn't usually happen? What did he think was supposed to happen? Finally, much to Rapunzel's sheer excitement he gave up with the weird look and decided "Alright fine! I take you all to see the stupid lanterns."

"Really?!" Rapunzel squealed in happiness. She spun toward Merida and bounced up and down. "He said yes he said yes he said yes he said yes!"

"Eh, Rapunzel," Merida tried to say, but she wasn't paying attention. She was too happy! Finally, she was going to see the lights! Oh goodness there was so much left to do! Why, she supposed she had to pack! Get together enough food to last a couple days, make sure she had her frying pan and- "Rapunzel-"

Merida was cut off by the sound of two male screams and a rather loud thud. Rapunzel turned around in surprise. Apparently she seemed to have forgotten that her hair was still wrapped around the chair and the two young men, and in her excitement had actually tugged them forward and knocked them both over. Flynn was laying facedown on the floor while Hiccup's legs were sticking straight up into the air. He blinked a few times to get his bearings back. With the two of them sitting there like that with the chair upside down and the stool completely unharmed, Rapunzel couldn't help but giggle. Merida followed this with a snicker of her own.



"I think you broke my smolder," Flynn's voice was muffled by the floor. The sound of it was the only thing needed to make Merida and Rapunzel burst into laughter all over again.

\* \* \*

><p>Things got together pretty well after that. Once Merida and Rapunzel stopped laughing, they helped the boys untangle themselves. Hiccup shuddered when he was finally free of Rapunzel's hair, trying really, really hard to not act like he was too disgusted by it. Flynn was muttering a few choice words under his breath, something about 'dumb blonds and gingers without souls,' which earned him a kick in the shin a la Merida. Of course that only resulted in more swear words, but it seemed that nothing short of a solar eclipse was going to bring down Rapunzel's mood now. She was dancing, literally dancing around them, singing a little song about how 'her life was starting to begin'. Even Hiccup was beginning to wonder just why he agreed to all this insanity in the first place.<p>

He approached Merida while Rapunzel had raced up the stairs, her hair moving once in a while as she danced around doing gods-know-what in there. Flynn had sat himself back down in the chair he was tied up in, not happy but Hiccup couldn't really care less.

"So." Hiccup said, mostly to start the conversation. "This is an interesting turn of events."

"Aye." Merida replied, her eyes distant. Hiccup snapped his fingers under her nose and made her jump. "Aye?!"

"You alright?" He asked.

"Oh, um," She tucked a curl out of her eyes. "Aye. I'm alright, yeah."

Hiccup wasn't sure if he believed her, but he accepted her answer and leaned against the wall next to her. "So what exactly made you want to go through with all this craziness, anyway?"

Merida's eyes roamed over the room, taking it all in slowly. " . . . look around ye, Hiccup. Tell me what you see."

Hiccup did so. "Um, paintings? I dunno, uh, lots of hobbies I guess?"

Merida nodded. She looked at him, then suddenly frowned. "Ye donnae understand what I'm talking about, do ye?"

Hiccup wasn't exactly ashamed to shake his head. "Not really, no."

Merida grumbled something inaudible but shook her head right back. "Ne'er mind." She muttered, crossing her arms. "I'm doing this because I want to, alright?" Her eyes slid toward him. "Ye donnae have to come with us. Ye can just ride yer dragon into the sunset and be off with ye."

Did he detect a note of regret? He hoped not. Still, he shook his head and looked away, trying to pay more attention to all the

paintings covering everything in this tower instead of the way her hair curled in nearly every direction. He coughed and Merida gave him an odd look. "Don't worry." He said, awkwardly picking at a stray thread coming off his sleeve. "I'm not just gonna strand you here. Besides," He shrugged his shoulders and slouched a little more into the wall. "Who knows? Maybe this whole mess could be fun. It's not like we don't need \_another\_ misfit tagging along for the ride."

Merida cracked a small grin. Hiccup wasn't sure if it was from amusement or relief. He didn't want to know. "Aye," She agreed, nodding.

"So, are you two gonna make out over there, or what?" Flynn suddenly spoke up, reminding the two that they weren't alone in the room. Hiccup and Merida reacted in pretty much the same way: sputtering and offering half-formed sentences and denials before shuffling away from each other rather quickly. Flynn raised an eyebrow and shared a look with the chameleon. Then he realized what he was doing and shook his head, walking to the window. "Look, I don't know about you guys or Blondie, but I'm gonna get a head start on the way down. This thing was a bitch to climb and it's gonna be even worse going down."

Merida glanced at Hiccup. "Do ye want to tell him we could just have Toothless take us down?" She whispered. Hiccup shook his head, lips curling with a slight smirk.

"Nah. Let him figure that out on his own."

A few minutes after Flynn's head had disappeared over the side of the windowsill, Rapunzel came flying back down the stairs with a big grin. "Okay!" She declared loudly, almost yelling at them. "I'm ready!"

Merida clapped her hands and nodded. "Alright then. Shall we go?"

Rapunzel nodded back vigorously, bouncing on her toes again with excitement. However, both Hiccup and Merida noticed that she didn't move to the window at first. Merida gave Hiccup a look. Somehow understanding and just labeling the moment as a necessary 'girl moment', the young viking simply gave her a thumbs up and followed Flynn. Instead of carefully climbing out and down, Hiccup put his fingers to his lips and whistled a high sharp tune. Then he jumped out the window.

"Oh my God-!" Rapunzel shrieked, looking at Merida with wildly concerned eyes and completely missing the black blur that swooped past the window. "This tower is so-! Will he be-?!"

Merida gently touched her shoulder, trying to calm her panic. So many new things in such a short amount of time. It was quite a wonder that the poor girl hadn't fainted yet. "Hiccup will be fine, lass," She assured her. "Now, it's our turn."

Rapunzel pointed at the window, green eyes wide with confusion and terror. "Nae," Merida answered before she could ask. "Ye donnae have to just jump out like he did. He's a bit mad, but don't worry. He's the good kind."

Her smile made Rapunzel's shoulders relax. It was slight, but it was there. She took a deep breath and held her hands out for Pascal, who quickly scurried up her arms to sit on her shoulder. Merida led her slowly to the window, helping the timid girl put her hair over the hook so she could lower herself down. The girls looked at each other, something unspoken passing through their eyes. "Would ye like to do it together?"

Rapunzel bobbed her head, unable to speak. Merida held out her hand and the older blond took it, almost instantly cutting off her fingers' circulation. "Yeah," Rapunzel whispered. "Together."

Her eyes peered over the edge, at the ground oh so far away. Just this morning that world Outside and below was just a dream, something outside her window she'd never thought she'd ever get the chance to touch. And here it was, that chance, staring her in the face and almost mocking her: \_Here I am. Come and get me.\_

But could she?

"\_Look at the world, so close, and I'm half-way to it,\_"

Rapunzel sang under her breath, getting a curious look from Merida. She didn't mean to confuse her, but singing was just one of the few ways Rapunzel knew of that would calm herself down. This was what she wanted. What she'd been dreaming about.

"\_Look at it all, so big, do I even dare?"

>Look at me, there at last!<br>I just have to do it . . . \_"

Her hands loosened around her hair and she chanced a half-glance back over her shoulder. There was still time to back out. Send these kind people on their way, parting as nothing more than simple friends. Mother would never have to know. And Rapunzel would get new paint. "\_Should I . . . ?\_" Should she just forget it? Forget it all?

One glance at Merida was all it took. Her new friend, waiting patient and kind, sitting on the sill with her head only slightly tilted to the side. Rapunzel steeled her shoulders and stepped forward, bathing her face in the sunlight. But it wasn't enough. She wanted it. All of it. The sunlight, the air, the ground and the sky . . . the window wasn't enough anymore. A moving painting in a frame was still just a picture if she couldn't . . .

"No." Rapunzel shook her head and took Merida's hand again. "\_Here I go!\_"

Merida's eyes widened when she was tugged almost violently out of the window sill, finding herself to be clinging onto Rapunzel for dear life as they fell like rocks out of the window. Neither of them screamed, but Rapunzel let out a whooping holler of delight when the wind rushed past and roared in her ears. Then just as suddenly as they were falling, they came to an abrupt stop. Merida peaked one eye open and sighed in relief when she realized she could just let go of Rapunzel and drop harmlessly to the ground. She looked back up at Rapunzel expectantly.

Her green eyes were the size of saucers, holding tight to the end of her hair and dangling in a curled position to keep her feet off the

ground. Flynn opened his mouth to say something but Hiccup hit him in the ribs, shutting the thief up. Rapunzel needed this. She needed this moment of caution, of being so close but still so far away. It took a few moments, but she began to lower her legs, touching her toes into the grass like a person would test the temperature of a lake before diving in. One toe became a foot, then two feet, and then with a loud almost-hysterical giggle, Rapunzel fell to her knees in the dirt.

"\_Just smell the grass, the dirt!  
>Just like I'd dreamed they'd be . . . <em>"

She lowered herself to lay sprawled out, closing her eyes in delight.

"\_Just feel that summer breeze, the way it's calling me!\_"

Hiccup leaned toward Merida. " . . . is she alright?"

Merida nodded. "Aye . . . I kin so . . . "

"\_For, like, the first time ever,\_  
>I'm completely free . . . <em>"

Hiccup didn't look convinced, but let the matter drop, turning his attention back to the skinny blond as she danced and sang. She chased butterflies and dandelion seeds, splashed Flynn with water from the creek, spinning around and around so many times they wondered if she was about to trip over her own hair. Then she spotted the small cave, the way that led them into this clearing and the only way in or out.

"\_I could go running, and racing!  
>And dancing, and chasing,<em>"

She started to make a bee-line for it, determination in the gaze of her eyes and the set of her shoulders.

"\_And leaping, and bounding,  
>Hair flying! Heart pounding!<em>"

She broke into a desperate run, trailing all her hair behind her as she went. At least she left an easy way to follow her in case she got lost.

"\_And splashing and reeling!  
>And finally feeling-<br>Now's when my life begins!\_"

Rapunzel shoved aside the leaf-curtain, taking her first look around the first place she had never, ever seen. The grass was so much greener! The sky was so much bluer! The birds' songs, so much merrier! Everything was suddenly in brighter hues, like her entire life was done in a portrait of blacks and whites and greys, and now she could finally see it all in color! So many bright colors! Different greens on so many different plants! Different browns on all these different trees! Even the sky- it's blue was so much more different than the sky she used to watch the lights in! Bigger and bolder and clearer and bigger and blacker and so close and-

What?

Rapunzel turned back around, spotting the creature she had only just glanced at in her attempt to take everything in at once. It was big, bigger than mother and bigger than Flynn. It crawled across the ground toward her on all fours, made up of some kind of black that she couldn't re-create even by mixing every color paint she owned. Green eyes, so much like hers and so much like . . . not, stared straight through her and pinned the young blond in place. She couldn't move. Couldn't even breathe!

"Oh!" Merida said, surprised as she came out of the tunnel behind Rapunzel. "Ye found Toothless!"

That was around the time when Rapunzel fainted.

Looking down at her with a deadpan expression on his face, Flynn remarked: "You know? I think this is the best thing that's happened all day."

## 7. Six: Mood Swingin' Down on Cloud Nine

**\*\*OMFG DUDES CHECK ME OUT I'M ALIVE! ahahaha, yeah, I know, you guys must hate me and the only reason I'm not murdered is because then you'd never get the next update xD All kidding aside, I really am sorry that this took me to long. I've had a lot on my plate these past few weeks, like school starting again (which takes up a crapload of my free time), my mom busted her knee and had to go to the hospital, and being a bridesmaid in my aunt's wedding. Of course, Doctor Who on Netflix probably didn't help, but none the less I reeled myself in and finished this chapter :D I was determined to get it up before the end of the month. I love you all for reviewing and favoriting and sending me PMs, because it fills me with love and reminds me that you all are waiting for me and it kicks my laziness in the butt. And- . . . oh great, now I'm babbling. Never mind. Just read the chapter xD and thanks again for waiting patiently!\*\***

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter Six:<strong> Mood Swingin' Down on Cloud Nine

\* \* \*

><p><em>~Corona~<em>

" . . . ink . . . lright?"

"Dun . . . on't . . . aybe . . . "

"N . . . plaining."

"Shu . . . ye!"

"Nnnrrrrgg?"

Rapunzel groaned, shifting a little bit to rub her forehead. Oh goodness, she felt dizzy. Her head was spinning and her thoughts were terribly muddled. The last time she felt this dizzy was when a few years ago she'd been spinning across the tower floor to show mother a

new dance she came up with. She had accidentally tripped over her own hair and knocked her head against a table. When she woke up, mother had been very disappointed in how uncoordinated she was. "\_Really, Rapunzel? Have you always been this clumsy?\_"

It had taken her a few hours to get un-dizzied, and by that time mother wasn't mad anymore. She called her 'sweetness' and kissed her head, and left for the night with a cheerful '\_Don't you go and hit that pretty little head of yours again, you hear?\_' Rapunzel had done her absolute best to not hit herself ever again.

Right now, Rapunzel was having a similar experience, only it wasn't as bad this time. She opened her eyes slowly, waiting for that pretty blurry Outside world to come back into focus. "Oh," She mumbled softly, trying to sit up.

"Careful, careful, not too fast."

Rapunzel blinked and looked over. There was her new friend Hiccup, kneeling beside her with his hands up. She blinked a few more times. "What happened?"

"You passed out." Flynn answered, and Rapunzel turned her head to find him standing against a . . . what were those tall things? Oh, yes, duh. Trees. "Hit your head on the way down."

"Did I?" Rapunzel asked, screwing her face up to try and remember. What \_did\_ she remember? Well, she remembered sliding down her hair and touching the soft rug of the Outside, grass, with her bare toes. She remembered the water up to her ankles and barely brushing the ends of her dress. She remembered dancing, and singing, and running farther and longer in a straight line than ever before. She remembered running out of the cave and into the \_real\_ Outside, where mother always went but wouldn't tell where she'd gone. She remembered the trees, so so much taller than she ever imagined. She remembered the sky; so much bluer!

And then the shape, that dark, startling shape that scared her and made her trip . . . and there it was, big and black and hanging over Hiccup's shoulder and looking down at her and \_oh holy heaven WHAT WAS IT?!\_

Rapunzel let out a little squeak and started to shuffle backwards as fast as she could. She held out her frying pan for self-defense, ready and willing to use it. The creature looked down at her and tilted it's head to the side, letting out a noise that had the poor blond squeaking all over again.

It was huge and black, looking like Pascal times ten-thousand. And it had giant wings and some kind of weird contraption around it. And it had green eyes the size of Rapunzel's fists and and and and-

"Look at her." Flynn muttered. "She's going to faint all over again."

Rapunzel felt her cheeks burning in embarrassment. She was not going to \_faint.\_ Again. "I-I- I'm-" I'm all right, she wanted to say. That wasn't too hard, was it? Just three little words. Three little, mono-syllabic words. One, two, three. "Ah- I'm- I-"

"Rapunzel," Hiccup said gently. "Don't worry," He gave her a grin and slowly her panic was beginning to go down. "This is my friend. His name is Toothless."

"T-" She croaked. Hiccup nodded. "Wh- . . . what is . . . "

"He's a dragon." He explained to her slowly, crouching beside her. He used small words and spoke patiently. Rapunzel was grateful for that. She'd never seen-well, she'd never actually seen anything other than birds and Pascal, but that wasn't the point. She'd never heard of anything called a 'dragon'. Or maybe she did. Maybe mother told her a story once, about dragons. Oh, oh yes! That was right. She remembered now!

Mother had said dragons were dangerous, vain and cruel creatures. They kidnapped little girls and stole all their valuables if they didn't go to bed or do exactly what their mothers told them to do. Rapunzel gulped and shuffled backwards again, making sure her frying pan was in between her and the giant black beast. "Is- is it d-d-d-d-dange-going to hurt me?" She stuttered and stammered, trying to get her mouth and body to obey her again.

Hiccup laughed. He laughed and the dragon laid down in the grass next to her. "No, of course not!" He turned a wide grin on the black beast that looked a little too big and awkward on his long face, but still managed to make him look somewhat . . . adorable.

Rapunzel eyed him, unsure. She glanced at Merida just to get someone else's opinion. The curly-haired ginger nodded and smiled. A few moments later Rapunzel relaxed and turned her eyes hesitantly back on Toothless.

The Night Fury had lumbered down on his stomach behind Hiccup, swishing his tail back and forth without a care in the world. He grunted at Rapunzel, sending a small burst of smoke out his nostrils. It was his way of greeting someone he hadn't decided he liked or not, and it made Hiccup chuckle nervously. The last thing they needed was to give the skittish blond another reason to run and duck and hide. Or faint.

Rapunzel swallowed, knuckles white around the handle of her frying pan. She slowly nodded, coming around to the idea that no, Toothless wasn't going to hurt her. Hiccup was actually thankful that she'd backpedaled before asking if he was dangerous. Because, yeah, Toothless was dangerous. But Hiccup was glad he didn't have to lie to her about it.

Flynn heaved a heavy and over exaggerated sigh. "Alright, come on, Blondie." He nodded at the girl's attention. "Get up already."

Rapunzel's cheeks colored and Hiccup gave the thief a look before moving to help her. She was roughly the same height as him, though she wasn't as unsteady on her feet as he was. Then again, nobody was as unsteady on their feet as he was.

Once Rapunzel was on her feet and all the grass and dirt had been brushed off her dress, it finally began to sink in to her what she'd done, and where she was. Everywhere in the forest was something new she'd never seen before. Different kinds of trees that she didn't

know the names of, flowers that looked oh so much different than the generic ones she'd painted on her walls. The sunlight kept bouncing off her hair in arcs of golds and rainbows, her big green eyes sparkling with joy at the wonder of it all.

Then the mood swings set in.

"I can't believe I did this!" Rapunzel babbled to Merida and Hiccup, because they were the only ones who seemed to be listening. "I-I can't believe I did this . . . I \_can't\_ believe I \_did this!\_"

She was dancing around rocks and through little babbling brooks. Studying Toothless with a childlike wonder only for the dragon to pretty much ignore her completely. She ran her fingers down tree trunks and picked up all kinds of rocks, sticks, and pebbles to feel how they felt when she held them.

"Oh, but mother," Rapunzel stopped so suddenly Flynn nearly ran into her. "She- . . . she'd be furious . . . "

She was distracted by a little pond growing lily pads with flowers, which she squealed at the cuteness of and had to sit on a rock to admire them. "But that's okay, because," She held up a lily pad flower like she was talking to it. "what she doesn't know won't kill her, right?"

The line of thought didn't continue until she found a small cave, and had to drag Merida inside to 'explore' it. At the very back of the cave, in the cold and the dark, was when Rapunzel curled up on herself and started rocking back and forth with a small panic attack. "Oh my gosh," She whispered, as Merida bent down to ask what was wrong. "This would \_kill\_ her!"

Merida managed to cheer her up and they left the cave not long after. As they passed, Hiccup didn't miss the '\_oh god what have we done?!\_' look Merida sent his way. The viking only raised an eyebrow and shrugged, reminding the redhead that it was \_her\_ idea to follow those glowy-bluey thingies in the first place. His response was a silent glare telling him to shut up.

After that they walked for a few more minutes without much problem. Merida and Hiccup were chatting idly between themselves, Flynn was off looking like a bored hostage, and Rapunzel was looking down a small hill with an odd gleam in her eye when the group turned to walk down it. They made it to the bottom only for Rapunzel to come streaking past, running with her hair trailing behind her as always. She was laughing and spinning and kept kicking piles of fallen dead leaves so they'd fall around Flynn like rain. "This is \_so\_ \_fun!\_" She yelled, making Flynn twitch since she was right by his ear and most likely popped an ear drum.

Once that was out of the way, she seemed to calm down somewhat. There was no more running, or screaming, or twitching like someone gave her a little too much candy. Mental note . . . do not give the crazy blond candy. Ever.

While Rapunzel was climbing a tree, alternating between using her hair and using Toothless to get up higher, Hiccup made the mistake of asking if she felt better now. When her green eyes widened a little bit and her narrow shoulder sagged, everyone (even the dragon and the



chameleon) turned to give him a glare. Rapunzel leaned her head against the tree trunk, her arms dangling in despair. "No, Hiccup," She said sorrowfully. "I don't feel better. I'm a terrible daughter. That's it. I'm going back."

Flynn, of course, perked up, and started to act oddly understanding about her change of heart. He patted her on the back and told her it was nothing to be ashamed off, and even started leading her back in the general direction of the tower. Toothless snorted and Pascal squeaked, diverting Rapunzel's attention back onto another hill covered in two-inch tall grass and dandelions scattered around. Her squeal of delight made Flynn twitch again and off she went, cartwheeling down the hill in spinning circles of gold. "I am never going back!" She laughed, falling sideways only to roll the rest of the way down, tying herself up in her own hair. She dissolved into a fit of giggles when they caught up to her, looking like a shivering golden cocoon of laughter.

Merida suggested to free herself by rolling back the other way, though once she was untangled Rapunzel ended up face down in the grass and dandelions and loudly proclaimed herself to be a 'despicable human being.'

There were face palms all around. Maybe taking her from the tower wasn't such a smart idea after all . . .

Hiccup managed to get her off the ground with a few kind words and a half-hearted promise that he would take her flying on Toothless. The dragon gave him a look like he wanted nothing to do with this disaster. None the less Rapunzel got up, rubbing her eyes and looking sorely depressed. Merida ran her hands through her hair and honestly didn't look surprised when her fingers got stuck in all those curls.

Nobody really reacted when, several minutes later, Rapunzel found a tall tree and proceeded to swing from its tall branches with the help of her hair. Nobody asked how she got her hair up that high, how she planned to get down, or why it didn't hurt. They just left the bipolar girl to her own devices and let her swing and scream that today was the. Best. Day. Ever.

Not long after that, after dancing and singing over a small group of rocks, Rapunzel sat down against the last one, pulled her knees up to her chest, and cried.

Hiccup and Merida sat down with sighs of only slight annoyance, wondering how long this one would last. Hiccup glanced over at Merida, leaning against Toothless with her head turned to the sky in exasperation. He raised an eyebrow.

"Things not going as smoothly as you thought?" He asked amicably. She twitched her blue eyes over at him to glare then looked back up and huffed.

"It wasnae my idea," She muttered, rubbing her forehead and trying not to be too annoyed at the older but more fragile girl. Honestly, how could anyone be mad at an innocent and confused girl who was just sitting there, bawling? "I just followed the Wisps."

"The whats?" Hiccup looked up when Flynn approached Rapunzel,

frowning when he bent down next to her.

"Listen," Flynn said gently. "I couldn't help but notice that . . . you seem to be a little at war with yourself about this."

Hiccup snorted. You think?

Rapunzel rubbed her eye and looked up at him in confusion. "What?" She asked in a small voice. Flynn put up his hands innocently.

"Now, I'm only picking up bits and pieces here," Flynn straightened up again. "Over protective mother, forbidden road trip? This is serious stuff!" He gave her a gentle smile. "But let me ease your conscious. This is all part of growing up."

Rapunzel looked up at him with interest, her eyes rimmed with a reddish tint. Hiccup and Merida narrowed their eyes. Okay, something was off. Since when was he trying to actually console her about this, rather than trying to drag her back to the tower? "Really?" Rapunzel asked softly.

Flynn nodded understandingly. "Sure! A little rebellion, a little adventure. That's good- healthy even!" He glanced at shoulder where Pascal had climbed up onto him, looking optimistic about him trying to cheer her up. He only glanced at the chameleon before brushing him easily off his shoulder.

Rapunzel sniffled and rubbed her nose. "You think?" She asked in a shaky voice. Flynn nodded.

"I \_know,\_ " He said, leaning in. "Listen. Does your mother deserve it? No," Rapunzel's face fell as she shook her head in agreement. "Would this break her heart and crush her soul? Of course!"

Rapunzel looked stricken, pulling lightly on a lock of her hair. Hiccup and Merida shared a warning glance with each other, finally understanding what the thief was playing at. "Break her heart?" Rapunzel whispered.

"In half." Flynn plucked a small berry of the bush next to him.

"Crush her soul?" She whimpered.

"Like a grape." Flynn squeezed the berry between his fingers for emphasis.

Merida frowned, quickly getting fed up with this cruel approach to Rapunzel's uneasiness. "Oi," she huffed, standing up and putting her hands on her hips to glare at Flynn disapprovingly. "Stop trying to scare the poor lass!"

Flynn put his hands on his chest, the picture of innocence.

Rapunzel sniffled and he moved to help her up, being mockingly kind and she was just a little too naive to realize it. "N-no, Merida," She murmured. "He's right . . . mother would be heartbroken . . ."

Flynn put on an apologetic face. "I am right, aren't I? Oh bother . .

. " His fake regret was almost dripping with sarcasm and condescending implications. He sighed. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but . . . I'm letting you out of the deal."

And there it was. His real reason for the sickening sweetness. "\_What\_?" Rapunzel gasped.

"That's right!" Flynn picked up the frying pan and Pascal off a rock, walking back to drop them in Rapunzel's hands. "But don't thank me. Let's all just turn around and get you home. Here's your pan here's your frog." He put an arm around Rapunzel to start leading her in the general direction of her tower just like earlier. "I get back my satchel and you get back a mother-daughter relationship based on mutual trust, and voila! We all part ways as unlikely friends!"

Merida gained a little scowl that Hiccup knew meant she was not happy, and made the motion of rolling up her sleeves. Hiccup quickly grabbed the back of her dress to stop her from trying to help. "What?!" She hissed back at him, but Hiccup put his hands on her shoulders.

"Just watch." He said softly.

Merida mouthed something about Hiccup being stupid, but didn't really have time to continue because Rapunzel had already shoved Flynn away and firmly told him she was going to see the lanterns no matter what. Flynn threw his hands in the air in exasperation. "Oh come on!" He snapped. "What is it going to take to get my satchel back?!"

Rapunzel narrowed her eyes and shoved her frying pan in Flynn's face threateningly. "I will use this." She warned him. Flynn put up his hands, deciding that maybe it wasn't a good idea to irritate a girl who was so bipolar.

Merida smiled and her shoulders relaxed. What do you know? Hiccup was right. Maybe Rapunzel wasn't as helpless as she'd originally thought?

Suddenly there was a rustle from behind and the sound of a twig snapping. Rapunzel's eyes snapped around and she yelped, latching onto the closest person who could protect her. She jumped onto Flynn's back, wrapping her arms around his neck and her legs around his hips from behind, holding out her frying pan to protect herself.

"What is it?!" She shrilled. "Is is ruffians?! Thugs?!" Flynn grunted when she shifted and almost knocked him over. "Have they come for me?!"

Hiccup glanced at Toothless and the dragon looked back. He hadn't moved, so there was no real danger. Hiccup just didn't have the heart to tell her that though.

A few seconds later out came the 'danger' that had spooked the poor blond so badly. A rabbit barely bigger than her head, sitting there looking up at the odd group with doeish eyes. Flynn looked at it and glanced at the girl clinging to his back. "Stay calm." He deadpanned. "It can probably smell fear."

Their reactions made it pretty clear that the little fluffy thing was not a threat. Nor was it a ruffian. Or a thug. She laughed nervously and climbed down. "Sorry," She said and backed away while Flynn tried to straighten himself. "I guess I'm just a little bit . . . jumpy."

Merida patted her friend on the shoulder comfortingly. "There's nothing wrong with that," She said. "Just take it all at yer own pace."

Hiccup nodded. "No need to overexert yourself."

Flynn straightened his vest. "I think it would be best to avoid ruffians and thugs though," He said thoughtfully. Rapunzel laughed.

"Ah ha, yeah . . . that'd probably be best." She agreed.

He looked away for a few minutes, thinking, while Rapunzel talked to Hiccup and Merida about which way they should go next and wither or not Toothless liked to eat chameleons. Hiccup was in the middle of saying "No, but he might eat annoying thieves once in a while if I ask nicely," When Flynn turned back around with a big smile on his face.

"I've got it!" He put his hands on his hips. "Are you guys hungry? Because I know a great place for lunch!"

"Really?" Rapunzel chirped, ever the optimist. "Well . . . where?"

Flynn grabbed her by the frying pan and started leading her off. "Oh don't worry!" He said easily. "You'll know it when you smell it!"

Hiccup and Merida shared a look, wondering for just a moment what they might have just gotten themselves involved in.

## 8. Seven: What's your dream

**\*\*So, uh . . . hai gais! Eh heh heh . . . okay, so, before you all start shooting me with arrows or sicking your Night Furies on me, allow me to explain myself. A shitload of crap has been piled on my plate these past few weeks, and am sincerely sorry that I couldn't get this chapter up as soon as I hoped it would. First off, my computer decided it had enough of me and decided to go caput, so now I'm stuck with the one my brother and I share. That put me back a couple days because I just wasn't used to this monster in comparison to my itty bitty laptop. The Hurricane Sandy came up for a visit, and her fiance Mr Noreaster was right on her heels, so that didn't help matters either. But regardless, here she is! New chapter, fresh off my fingers. I hope you guys like it!**  
><strong>

**\*\*Oh, and by the way, I am finally the proud owner of my very own copy of Brave! \*does happy dance\* They . . . they all just look so nice next to each other on my movie shelf. \*Sniffle.\***

><strong>

**\*\*But anyway, yeah, sorry again, and as apology this chapter ended up being almost twice as long as they normally are! So, now that I've talked your ears off for probably longer than any of you guys would have liked . . . I give you the next chapter.\*\***

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter Seven:<strong> What's your dream?

\_\_~Corona~\_\_

Maximus the Palace Guard horse was having the most terrible day.

Things had started off okay. Usual, like every other day before that. He woke up in the palace stable for his daily morning grooming, and stood still while the stable boys brushed out his mane and tail before tying it up to keep his long crystal-white hair out of his and his rider's faces. The boys put on his blanket and saddle, situating it to be comfortable for man and beast, before taking him by the reins and leading him out. He ate his breakfast and stood around with the other horses, waiting for the guards to come and take them out for their routine exorcize.

This was where things branched off into different, more exciting territory.

The human guards came running to the stables and ordered all the hands away. Maximus nickered as his blood pressure spiked. \_Criminal chase criminal chase criminal chase! \_He loved chasing criminals. Nothing got the pure-bred white stallion going faster, or left him with a better sense of accomplishment, than chasing a runaway criminal through the forest. There was just nothing to describe it.

Or, at least, that was how things were going, right up until said criminal somehow managed to boot the Captain right off Maximus' saddle. It was the most humiliating moment of the horse's life, but he didn't let that stop him. The orders were to retrieve the crown at all costs- and he had a pretty good feeling it was being carted around in that dingy old satchel hanging from the stupid thief's shoulder. His retrieval was going well- right up until the thief (God what an idiot) ended up throwing it over the side of a cliff! Honestly, thieves were getting dumber and dumber these days.

Then they both fell off said cliff trying to get the damn bag back, leaving Maximus lost and nearly crippling his legs. But the purebred was made of tougher stuff than that! No little fall would be able to stop him now. He would get that crown back at all costs!

. . . now if only he knew where the stupid thief went.

Maximus knew without a doubt that horses were not bloodhounds. However, he did have a fellow from his old training days who was, and showed him a thing or two about catching a scent and chasing a crook. So he caught the idiot's trail and followed it- almost managing to catch up to him just in time for the black monstrosity to come

charging at him. It was a huge mess, getting chased through the forest by a monster Maximus was sure shouldn't even \_exist\_, but he did in fact manage to get away and took some time to himself to be sure he wasn't going crazy. It took a couple knocks against a boulder before his head felt clear again . . . although in retrospect that probably wasn't the smartest of decisions.

Regardless, here he was, wandering lost through an unfamiliar part of the forest. Just his luck, he supposed grumpily. He knew it wasn't out of the Kingdom's boundaries because every once in a while he'd pass a poster nailed to a tree advertising the Princess' Birthday celebration tomorrow. That was his deadline. If he didn't get the crown back before the next night, it was all over.

Another tree covered in parchment posters caught the horse's attention, and without much else to do, he trotted over to it. There was the usual advertisements that he'd seen before, along with two more posters he hadn't seen before. One featured a girl with wild hair and a freckled smiling face under the word MISSING, and beside it was a male with an abnormal nose under WANTED. Maximus narrowed his eyes, taking a closer look at the man. Oddly enough, he almost familiar. Taking his hoof and covering the nose, Maximus snorted in fury when the smirking face of the idiot thief stared back at him. He ripped the poster down and tore it to shreds with his teeth. That damned thief! When Maximus got his hands- hooves- on that idiot-!

Suddenly, his ear flicked backwards at the sound of a twig snapping somewhere behind him. Knowing someone was approaching and he had to think fast, Maximus galloped toward a large boulder to hide behind, dragging down a branch from a nearby tree to cover his head. Taking a deep breath and counting mentally to three, he reeled back and took a flying leap over the rock and neighed threateningly at the fool who dared to think they could sneak up on him-

The woman gasped in shock and stumbled back a step, her black cloak and red dress swishing around her legs. Maximus stared at the young civilian woman before sighing in exasperation. See? Terrible day. The woman huffed in indignation and straightened her hood over her tidy curls. "A palace horse," She sneered, glaring at the sun emblem of Corona across Maximus' chest. Maximus snorted back in annoyance and would have just turned to leave had the woman's eyes not suddenly widened in dawning horror. " . . . where's your rider? . . . Rapunzel . . . "

Her head snapped around, crying the girl's name in sudden terror. "Rapunzel!" She dropped her basket full of strange-looking seashells and let them all scatter across the ground as she whirled on her heel and went sprinting back off through the trees.

Maximus watched her go, his head tilted to the side in confusion. What on earth was all that about?

\* \* \*

><p><em>~Corona~<em>

"I know it's around here somewhere," Flynn mused, leading the other three plus dragon through the trees. The past few minutes had passed silently, or at least it did between Hiccup and Merida, who were too

busy glaring at the back of Flynn's head to really say much. Rapunzel had finally decided that Toothless was just as harmless as they told her he was . . . and was currently laying on his back, playing with her hair as she talked the dragon's ear off.

They came up to a small break in the tree line, and Flynn came to an abrupt stop. Rapunzel's head perked up a little bit. "Are we here?" She asked excitedly. Toothless huffed and looked back at Hiccup, making it rather clear he wasn't amused by the perky blond taking a ride on his back. \_Please let us be there\_, his eyes were saying.

But Flynn shook his head. "Nope, but we are close to the road." He looked back at Rapunzel and Toothless with a hand on his chin, stroking his small tuft of a goatee. "You know, shortie, I hate to say it but I think the place we're going doesn't really allow . . . pets."

Hiccup stared at him blankly.

Flynn continued anyway. "Sorry, Lizard Breath, you're gonna have to stay here."

Toothless growled warningly. Seems Hiccup and Merida weren't the only ones who found the smart-alecky thief annoying. Hiccup heaved a sigh and pinched the bridge of his nose, already beginning to see himself taking the role of mediator. He gestured to Rapunzel to get down off of Toothless. The girl pouted but did as she was asked. Hiccup held out his hand and Toothless lumbered over, nuzzling Merida's curls as he came. "Sorry, bud," Hiccup mumbled. "But the jerk is right. You know we can't bring you into populated areas."

Toothless offered a snort that probably meant: \_we can't\_?

Hiccup patted his head regretfully and nodded. The dragon huffed, growled at Flynn and nuzzled Merida again, before turning back toward the woods and somehow managing to hide his bulky black shape within the thicker trees. "Will he be okay?" Rapunzel asked as they watched the dragon go.

"Aye," Merida spoke up finally. "He'll be alright."

Flynn clapped his hands. "Alright then! You guys ready? Cause this place is going to rock your stomachs!"

He led them down to the dirt road, which was marked with wooden fences every several feet. Flynn looked back and forth before taking a left and started strolling like all was right with the world. Rapunzel skipped along behind him, happy as a clam, and Hiccup and Merida brought up the rear.

"I really don't think he's just taking us somewhere for lunch," Hiccup muttered to the girl beside him. When she didn't reply, he glanced over and realized she seemed distracted. "Mer," He nudged her and the redhead jumped. "You alright?"

"Oh, aye," She bobbed her head in a nod that seemed just a tad bit too frantic to be genuine. Hiccup frowned, not believing it for a second.

"Liar," He accused with small twitch of his lips. Merida gave him a look and he shrugged, honestly concerned. "Seriously, what's the matter."

"I'm just . . . thinking," She sighed finally.

"Yeah, I could tell that much." Hiccup deadpanned. He planned on prying a bit more- because since when was Merida this quiet for this long- but he was interrupted by Flynn's voice loudly declaring:

"Aha! There it is! The Snuggly Duckling!" Flynn pretended to gush cheerfully, pointing out a sign with a yellow painted duck on it. "Don't want you scaring and giving up on this whole endeavor now do we?"

"Well," Rapunzel sent an annoyed Merida a reassuring grin. "I do like ducklings!"

"Yay!"

The building Flynn indicated looked more like a seedy pub than any kind of restaurant. It was built with it's back right up against the tree, and Hiccup had to admit the place needed a lot of work. The ground curved slightly under it, causing the whole thing to lean forward and too the side. It gave of a concerning effect that the wall was going to fall on top of you as you walked up to it.

The four of them strode up to the door and Flynn put his hand on Rapunzel's back. He offered the girl a grin that had Merida instantly frowning. "You ready?" He asked her.

Rapunzel bobbed her head excitedly. "Yes!"

Flynn nodded and slammed the door open. "Garcon!" He shouted into the depths of the dark eatery. "Your finest table please!"

The smell of stale alcohol hit them like a wall. Rapunzel stared into the 'Snuggly Duckling' for all of three seconds before she was gasping in shock.

The inside was definitely farthest from what the name and the sign would have a person expect. The lighting was dim, coming from a chandelier with low-burning candles and a fire place deep in the back. Several wooden tables were scattered around the joint, and there were all kinds of hunting trophies displayed on the walls and above the mantle on the fireplace. The air was musty and smelled sour, making Merida cringe. Hiccup was sure he was supposed to find the place repulsive and disgusting, but, frankly, the smell reminded him on the main meeting hall back on Burk. Viking smell.

\_Viking smell\_.

A mantra of \_ohcrapohcrapohcrapohcrap\_ began to run around his head. Every man inside the pub had turned their heads toward the door, mouths curving downward into sneers and scowls. Flynn put his hands on Rapunzel's shoulders, completely ignoring the way her body was stiff and how she was holding out her frying pan like a sword for protection. He guided the blond inside despite her little cries of protest, speaking smoothly and condescendingly into her ear.



"You smell that?" He chuckled. "Take a deep breath through the nose!" Here Flynn actually breathed in the sour smell of the pub, a smile on his face. "Just really let it all sink in! What are you getting?" He asked the terrified girl as he led her through the group of thugs. Their dark angry eyes pointed downward with scarred up faces and beefy arms making them all look like they were just waiting for an excuse to bash all their heads in. Hiccup wasn't really paying attention to the way they all looked. He was more focused on what they had on their heads.

Far too many of them were wearing helmets with horns. Even more than far too many were paying too much attention to him. Oh Odin help him if any of them recognized him he was finished.

" . . . overall it just smells like the color brown. Your thoughts?" Flynn finished, letting Rapunzel's shoulders go when her hair was grabbed by a short squat man with bushy muttonchops that bridged together over his lips. Rapunzel squeaked, quickly collecting as much of her hair as she could before skittering away.

" . . . that's a lot of hair," The thug rumbled in a deep baritone, sounding completely deadpan. Rapunzel's hair slid through his fingers as she fled, no where near the ends of it.

"She's groing it out!" Flynn replied, cheerful but equally deadpan. "Is that blood in your mustash?" He continued. "Shortie!" He called to Hiccup. "Look at this! Look at all the blood in his mustash! Good sir that is a lot of blood!"

Hiccup wanted to smack his forehead. Of course this place wasn't some 'great place for lunch'. He honestly should have known better, but he figured that since the last time he and Merida ate was about two days ago it led them both to not think clearly when the concept of food came up.

Rapunzel backed away from the group of men by the door and ended up bumping into a beefy guy at the bar. He growled a warning and Rapunzel showed off her pan to him as well, looking like she wasn't sure who to aim it at. Hiccup struggled to ignore the way the thug's eyes drifted off of Rapunzel and onto him. "You don't look so good, Blondie," Flynn said with false concern. "Maybe we should get you home, call it a day?" He put his arm around her shoulder and started to lead her toward the door. Hiccup felt a hand on his wrist and he nearly leapt out of his skin, but it was just Merida, tugging him urgently to follow Rapunzel and Flynn. There was a fury in her eyes that made it clear Flynn was sure to expect pain. Hiccup allowed himself to be dragged. He really didn't like the way the men with the Viking helmets were looking at him. He also didn't like the almost frightened way Merida was looking at them, either.

"You'll probably be better off," Flynn continued to babble. Honestly, did the man ever shut up? "I mean, this is a five-star joint after all. If you can't handle this place then, well, maybe you should be back in your tower?"

They were exactly three steps away from the door when it slammed shut. The man from the bar had appeared there in nanoseconds, pinning two pieces of paper to the wood with a large hand. Hiccup wasn't sure, but he could have sworn that in reaction to the sudden sound,

Flynn had put himself between Rapunzel the the thug holding the door shut. He knew without a doubt though that Merida had stepped in front of him, reaching to her shoulder like there was something for her to grab there. The thug turned to give Flynn a dark once over, one that was filled with a small side of greed that honestly freaked Hiccup out a little. "Is this you?" He growled, pointing at the inked picture on the topmost paper.

Flynn looked at it for a second, then leaned over and moved the thug's finger to the side. The image looked like him, right down to his shirt and vest. The only odd thing about it was the comically large nose coming out of his face. "Ugh," Flynn huffed. "Now they're just being mean."

"Oh-ho, it's them all right," Chuckled a man with a balding head and a hook for a right hand. "Greto," He thumbed to a dark haired guy in a blue shirt somewhere behind him. "Go find some guards!" He grabbed Flynn by the collar. "That reward's gonna buy me a new hook!"

Flynn was yanked out of his hand, and shockingly, Merida was snagged by her knotted curls by a whole other pair of thugs. "Hey!" Hiccup yelped when Rapunzel squeaked, ignoring the resulting game of keep-away with Flynn as the ball.

Merida yowled in pain as the hand fisted in her hair pulled harshly. A group of thugs had crowded around her, one holding her as she struggled and another trying to hold up a piece of paper by her head. Hiccup clenched his fists and tried to pretend he was built of bigger stuff than he was, but dammit he was like a Terror trying to fight off a Grunkle.

"What d'ya think, Marko?" Th guy holding Merida huffed. "Told ya she was th'girl."

Merida yelled and struggled. "Lemme go!"

"Shut up!" The other guy snapped, and took another look at the poster. "Sure \_looks\_ like 'er. Got th' accent to prove it. An' th' hair." He leaned in a little closer to Merida. "Maybe a lit'le too ragged."

Merida growled, infuriated. None of the grunts around her looked at all concerned with the increasingly angry red head they were holding. For some reason that made Hiccup mad. Very, very mad. So mad that he was two seconds away from lifting his fingers and whistling for Toothless. To Hel with not letting anyone know he had a dragon! Toothless would make them all regret touching his redhead.

His redheaded \_friend.\_ Stop looking at him like that.

However, before Hiccup could so much as twitch, Merida let out another angry noise before she reached up and grabbed the guy holding her by his shoulder plates. Then, with a grunt, she proceeded to promptly twisted and heaved the thug three times her size over her head and throw him into the guy with the poster.

Hiccup stood there, and stared, with his jaw hanging open in shock. Merida huffed and fixed her skirt, not even trying with the mess of her hair. She raised an eyebrow at Hiccup's gobsmacked expression, telling him dryly to close it before bugs made their homes inside.

Hiccup's teeth clacked together when he did, following behind her as she approached the quickly escalating fist fight over one Flynn Rider. Taking a long curved pirate sword off of someone's belt in brief passing, she proceeded to enter the fight with an enraged yell.

"Hiccup!" Rapunzel cried, latching herself onto his arm the second Merida's hair vanished between the flying limbs and clashing metal. "We gotta do something!"

He gave her an incredulous look. Had she not seen his chicken-like physic? What the heck did she expect him to be able to do!?

Rapunzel replied with an 'oh gosh you're useless' face and let her green eyes flicker around for an idea. Handing Hiccup her frying pan, she frantically started searching for the ends of her hair. Hiccup looked back into the fight, finding Flynn to be being lifted into the air by the man with the overly large horned Viking helmet. Hiccup swallowed and cried out in alarm when he watched the guy with the hook pin Merida back with it while his other hand reeled back to hit Flynn.

"Not the nose!" Flynn was begging, obviously having all his priorities in order. "Not the nose not the nose!"

There was a flicker of gold and Rapunzel had thrown her hair over a support beam like it was a grappling hook, wrapping it around a tree branch tight enough that when she yanked, the tree branch moved but her hair stayed in place. Hiccup didn't bother trying to figure out the mechanics of this, just watching as she continued to pull the branch back with all her strength. A second later she let go, and the tree branch smacked against the top of bald hook-handed guy.

"Put them down!" She shouted, stomping her foot firmly.

Every single person turned to look at the two skinny teenagers standing there, Hiccup starting to chuckle nervously.

"Look," Rapunzel said breathlessly. "We don't know where we are, and we need them to take me to see the lanterns because I've been dreaming about them my whole life! Find your humanity!" She yelled. "Haven't any of you ever had a dream?!"

A tense silence settled over the pub. It was thick and heavy like a humid day, springing a sweat up onto Hiccup's skin the longer these thugs went without responding at all. Oh this was not good. This so, so very not good.

The big bald guy unhooked Merida and released Flynn, only to have the thief hung by his blue vest off a coat hook. He drew his weapon, an axe that honestly could have been much bigger by viking standards, and slowly began to stomp his way toward them. Hiccup swallowed, forcing himself to puff his chest out and ready his whistling fingers. This was going to get ugly. Really ugly, really fast.

Rapunzel ducked behind him, peaking around his shoulder as her green eyes slowly got wider with terror. The bald guy got right up into their faces, a deep snarl dragging the corners of his square head

downward. Hiccup could have sworn he heard Merida call their names, but he couldn't hear her with this guy's so called 'really bad man smell' suffocating him. Oh Gods, this thug was going to kill them!

Hiccup screwed his eyes shut and lifted his fingers. It was Toothless time.

"I had a dream . . . once."

Hiccup opened his eyes slightly and peaked through the crack. He still couldn't breathe and Rapunzel was cutting off the blood flow to his arm (Gods almighty the girl had a grip!), but he was able to see the bald thug lift his axe and throw it in the general direction of a terrified-looking accordion player was sitting in the corner amidst a large group of other weapons that had been thrown at him in the past. Sitting board-straight, the poor man began to timidly play his instrument. An oddly upbeat and happy tune began to play, only worsening Hiccup's confusion.

"\_I'm malicious, mean and scary!\_"

Oh dear Odin and Thor, please not the singing again . . .

"\_My sneer could curdle dairy!

>And violence-wise my hands are not the cleanest!<em>"

The bald thug stepped back and gestured to the chalk-outline of a body on the wooden floor. Hiccup swore that was not there before. He gently ushered Rapunzel backwards.

"\_But despite my evil look,

>And my temper and my hook,<em>"

Here he threw a guy with an overly-large nose who was just innocently drinking his ale clear across the room with one hand. A spotlight, once again coming clear out of nowhere, shone down and reflected off the guy's shiny head. He used a grouping of barrels to climb up onto a stage, revealing a small squat . . . was that a piano?

"\_I've always yearned to be a concert pianist!\_"

His hook tapped across the keys, the light sound of the surprisingly well-tuned instrument bursting to life. The bald guy sat down at the bench, proceeding to play like the lack of his hand didn't bother him at all.

"\_Can't you see me on the stage performing Mozart?

>Ticklin' the ivories 'til they gleam?<em>"

He scraped his hook across the keys, sending the little off-white pieces flying at Hiccup and Rapunzel. She used her pan to protect them, a small giggle of amusement starting to show on her lips.

"\_Yet I'd rather be called deadly,\_" he offered Rapunzel a wink.

><em>For my killer show tune medley!<em>"

He played off a riff and threw his finger toward the crowd somewhere.

"Thank you!" He called. "\_Cause way down deep inside I've got a dream!\_"

Oh gods this was not happening.

"\_He's got a dream!\_" The other thugs joined in easily, like this was a whole rehearsed and choreographed number from some kind of theater show.

><em>He's got a dream!<em>"

"\_See, I ain't as cruel and vicious as I seem!\_" The bald guy continued, getting a full-out laugh from Rapunzel as she sat down on a box beside the piano, dragging Hiccup down with her. He preformed another scrape down the keys, ending with a flourish of his arm that only a quick duck prevented Rapunzel and Hiccup from getting smacked in the face. No, that unfortunate event was carried onto the big nose thug who had come back to reclaim his seat. The hit threw him clear onto his back.

>"<em>Though I do love breaking themurs,<br>You can count me with the dreamers,

>Cause way down deep inside I've got a dream!<em>"

Hiccup and Rapunzel turned around when the other thug sat up, looking a little dizzy but not at all concussed.

"\_I've got scars and lumps and bruises,\_" He began, lifting his arm for Rapunzel to see.

>"<em>Plus something here that oozes,<em>" Um, ew?

>"<em>And lets not even mention my complexion!<em>" He gestured to his face, where there were large unfortunate patches of reddish skin.

"\_But despite my extra toes,\_" Didn't need to see that!

>"<em>And my guider,<br>And my nose,\_" He smiled shyly at Rapunzel and offered her a flower.

"\_I really wanna make a love connection!\_" The girl looked touched, smiling sweetly at the poor guy. Hiccup couldn't resist a laugh. This was just too ridiculous!

Next thing Hiccup knew, the Nose Thug was sitting in some random boat with a short horribly drunk old man who was holding a parasol.

"\_Can't you see me with a special little lady?\_" He sang. The old guy opened his lacy umbrella.

>"<em>Rowing in a rowboat down the stream?<em>" Using a spear, he scraped across the floor in the random little rowboat like he was in a river.

"\_Though I'm one disgusting blighter,

>I'm a lover!<br>Not a fighter!\_"

He lifted the old drunk guy in a rope harness that hung from one of the beams up above. Pulling it back, he let the creepy old man dressed like a cupid fly around the ceiling.

"\_Cause way down deep inside,

>I've got a dream!<em>"

The rest of the thugs joined in for this verse, and Hiccup was having a hard time controlling the smile growing across his face.

"\_I've got a dream!\_" Nose guy sang.  
>"<em>He's got a dream!<em>" The other guys echoed.  
>"<em>And I know one day romance will reign supreme!<em>" Hiccup caught a glimpse of Flynn's face as the Old Drunk Cupid flew past him, still hanging off the coat hook. It was completely deadpan and not amused at all, sending Hiccup into a whole new round of hysterics.

"\_Though my face leaves people screaming,\_" Nose guy hugged a random guy at the bar, making him spurt his drink out in shock.

>"<em>There's a child behind it, dreaming!<br>Like everybody else, I've got a dream!\_"

"\_Thor would like to quit and be a florist,\_" Some guy sang about a guy in the corner making floral arrangements out of weeds, rats, and skulls.

>"<em>Gunter does interior design!<em>" Another indicated a tall skinny guy by the wall with a carved bear chair and a painting of a puppy.

>"<em>Ulf is into mime!<em>" Flynn gave the man with make-up a death glare.

>"<em>Attila's cupcakes are sublime!<em>" A man with a heavy helmet offered Merida a pan of white-frosted cupcakes with little cherries on them. She looked startled but interested.

>"<em>Bruiser knits!<br>Killer sews!

>Fang does little puppet shows!<em>"

Bald Guy stood in front of the thug with the overly large helmet.

>"<em>And Vladimir collects ceramic unicorns!<em>"

In the gargantuan man's fingers he held two of the little horned horses, tinging them together in tune with the song. After this the music went off into instrumental stuff, the guy on the accordion did his little scared thing, and Bald Guy on the piano played his little heart out.

Rapunzel nudged Hiccup's shoulder. "You should sing!" She gushed.

"What?" He yelped, all traces of laughter gone in exchange for surprise.

She bobbed her head, looking as excited as a little boy being given his first flail. "No," Hiccup shook his head. "No, no no no!"

Her eyes turned big and teary, tilting her head downwards a little bit to show off her pouted lip. "Please?" She whispered.

Oh hel she looked just like Toothless.

Desperate for some kind of assistance or maybe a way out, Hiccup looked around for Merida's now familiar frizzed-out head. He found her in seconds, already looking their way with an oddly . . . expectant look on her face. Hiccup shook his head at her. She nodded back. He shook. She nodded.

Thor help him, that girl was the spawn of a devil.

Ten seconds later the music was picking up again. Rapunzel must have taken his lack of answer as a 'sure, why the hel not?!' and dragged him up onto a nearby table. Every thug was looking at him, waiting for him to sing. Here was the problem. Hiccup never sang before. Ever.

"I've, uh," He swallowed. "\_I've got a dream?\_"

He spotted Merida in the crowd, her arms crossed as she leaned against the sword she'd stolen. She offered him a kind smile and a wave of encouragement. Oddly, that made him feel better. Puffing out his chest like the man he wished he was, Hiccup took a deep breath, and began to sing.

"\_I dream of a land,  
>Where boys don't have to be men,<br>Where every father,  
>Supports his . . . <em>uh,\_ son?\_"

Oh this was stupid, he was not doing this.

Merida's blue eyes pierced his own, making the young viking swallow thickly. Damn those eyes!

"Okay okay, hang on," He muttered to himself. He could do better than that.

"\_I'm tall and kind of lanky,  
>Built like that guy on the railing!<em>" He pointed at the skinny drunk guy.  
>"<em>My muscles always fail me,<br>And guys shouldn't really be  
brainy!\_"

\_But I am what I am,  
>and now matter what they tell me,<br>I'm not my dad, I'm not a  
killer and I'm not a sailor,  
>But they've got dreams and so do I,<br>And I will not be  
denied-\_

\_Because, \_oh to hel with it,\_ because way down deep inside  
>I'VE GOT A DREAM!<em>"

Well, that was terrible. The only part that really rhymed was the ending, but even despite all that the thugs were cheering him on like he was the best thing they heard all day.

"\_What father isn't proud of his son?\_" Hiccup continued.

>"<em>What makes me so much less than what he wants?<br>They've got  
dreams and so do I,  
>And my dreams wont be denied!<em>

\_Cause way down deep inside I've got a dream!\_"

Another cheer rose over the thugs and Hiccup hopped off the table. His face was flushed and he was horribly embarrassed by the whole mess. Who ever said he could sing well anyway? But Rapunzel was laughing and her moods were often infectious. Hiccup chuckled right

along with her until Merida showed up beside him and laid a hand on his shoulder. Her small, shy grin was complement enough, and without warning Hiccup pulled the redhead into a tight hug filled with laughter and awkward embarrassment.

"What about you?" They heard, causing the little group to separate. The thugs, satisfied with Hiccup's performance, had moved onto their next victim.

Flynn stared down at them from his place on the coat rack, not impressed in the slightest. "I'm sorry- me?"

"What's your dream?" The guy with blood in his mustash lowered Flynn back to the ground.

The thief held up his hands and crossed his arms. "No no, sorry fellas." He shook his head and gave the grouping of menacing singers a grin. "I don't sing."

Several dozen swords were shoved into his face. Hiccup wasn't surprised that he reconsidered. Several moments later Flynn was up and dancing on the bar counter top, singing nervously.

"\_I've got dreams like you, no really!  
>Just much less . . . touchy-feely!<em>  
><em>They mainly happen somewhere warm and sunny!<em>" He sided up to Vladimir with his ceramic unicorns and plucked one from the giant's fingers.  
>"<em>On an island that I own,<em>" He set the unicorn down onto a bit of dried and crusty ale in the center of a large brown cooking pot, making it look like an unicorn on an island.  
>"<em>Tanned and rested and alone!<em>"

Flynn was pulled by his feet off the counter, held aloft by several of the thugs and ruffians.

"\_Surrounded by ENORMOUS\_ \_piles of money!\_"

Rapunzel danced her way onto the tabletop where Hiccup gave his solo.

"\_I've got a dream!\_" She waved eagerly.  
>"<em>I've got a dream!<br>I just wanna see the floating lanterns gleam!  
>And with every passing hour,<br>I'm \_so glad \_I left my tower!\_"

\_Like all you lovely folks I've got a dream!\_"

And that was how they all spent their next few minutes, singing and dancing and rolling on giant barrels, flying through the air and swinging from candle chandeliers, juggling torches and breathing fire, men being tossed through windows and just all around acting like complete and total idiots. Hiccup couldn't remember the last time he had this much fun with other people!

But alas, their good time had to come to and end. Greto had to come back, slamming the door open with an over-excited expression of greed in his eyes. "I found the guards!" He shouted into the stilled mess of dancing ruffians and idiot teenagers.



One of the posters drifted off the counter from the wind of the door opening so suddenly. He looked down at it, suddenly finding himself stuck staring when he realized what, or better yet, who, was staring back at him.

He recognized that hair anywhere. It was Merida, or perhaps a simplified cartoony version of her anyway. But there was no denying her image, under a big bold black declaration of MISSING.

There was no time for him to puzzle through this new discovery, because before he knew it Merida and Flynn were grabbing his arms and they had no choice but to duck and hide behind the bar counter as the Corona guardsmen came storming into the pub.

## 9. Eight: By Far the Strangest Thing

**\*\*So yeah. I'm not gonna make excuses. I'm the only reason why this hasn't been updated in so damn long. But anyway. I hope everyone had happy whatever-you-celebrates, and a happy new year from me ;)\*\*\***

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter Eight: <strong>By Far the Strangest Thing

\* \* \*

><p><em>~Corona~<em>

\_Shitshitshitshitshitshisshii iiiiiiittt . . . . \_

Thus went the the thoughts of one such Flynn Rider, head ducked and body scrunched up under a bar in a seedy pub populated by singing thugs. If he had a dime for every time he was in a situation like this . . . well, he'd only have twenty cents but it was weird that it happened twice, right?

"Where's Rider?" The head guard snarled as he stormed inside, shoving the thug Greto out of the way. "Find him," He ordered the men behind him. "Turn the whole place \_upside down\_ if you have to!"

The four huddled under the bar winced collectively as his fist came down on the counter top with a slam.

"What the hell did you do?!" Hiccup mouthed at him around a mouthful of Ginger's hair. Flynn waved his hand dismissively, silently telling him they'd talk about it later, probably around an open campfire, while Blondie patiently tried to torture the tangles out of Ginger's mop. Oh yes. Flynn just cracked himself up.

Waving at the other three to stay hidden, Flynn shifted just a little bit to take a small peak over top the counter. Just to see how many guards were coming in. If there weren't that many in this party then maybe Blondie and Hiccup could sing the thugs into helping them escape.

In his head, Flynn counted about five or six guards already inside, but that didn't mean there weren't more outside. Just as he thought this, two more guards walked in through the little door, and between

him stood two tall men with cropped short red hair and several scars over their identical faces. \_The Stabbingtons.\_

"Shit," Flynn mumbled, all but flying back under the bar. He wasn't retreating. No, not at all. He was just . . . regrouping, that was it, yes. Okay though, he had to focus now. If the guards had caught the Stabbington twins, then that meant the Stabbingtons were not happy. Not happy Stabbingtons meant a swiz-cheese Flynn Rider.

"What do we do?" Curly-top hissed lowly, and Flynn could only shrug, like, what did she expect him to be able to do!?

Something tapped Flynn on the shoulder and he squeaked. It was a totally manly squeak, shut up. He looked up and found Piano-playing Hook-thug to be looming over them, indicating something off to the left with his eyes.

Crawling out of their hiding place, Hook-hand-thug pulled down one of the levers for the alcohol. Only no ale came out of the tap; instead the floor let out a quiet groan and with a rattle of chains, a large trap door opened down into a dark, cool but dry cave.

"Go," Hook-hand told them with a smile. "Live your dream."

Flynn cheered up considerably. "I will."

"Your dream stinks," Hook-hand deadpanned and nodded to Rapunzel and Hiccup. "I was talkin' to them."

Annoyed again, Flynn rolled his eyes and started crawling down into the cave. Glancing behind him when he could stand up straight again, an unconscious frown tugged his lips downward. "Thanks for everything," Blondie said to Hook-hand, and gave the thug a small kiss on the cheek for his trouble. Wow, okay. That wasn't annoying. That hadn't annoyed him at all.

"Hiccup," Ginger spoke to the scrawny kid, who jumped a little at being addressed. "What about Toothless?"

"I-, uh," He coughed and scratched his head, a motion that made Ginger raise her eyebrow. "I'll just whistle for him wherever we come out. He should find us without trouble. Uh," He glanced at Hook-hand. "Where does this tunnel go?"

"'Bout a three minute walk southwest," He explained quickly, glancing up toward the pub where the other thugs were trying and succeeding at stalling the guards. "It'll take you down to the damn at the bottom of the hill. Climb the rope ladder and make sure to take the tunnel to the right. There was a cave-in down the shaft that led to the river and it's a dead-end now."

Flynn could almost see the kid file this information away for future use. "Okay, thanks."

Hook-hand glanced back again. "You guys better get out of here," He huffed. "We can't keep this door open for long." With a sudden grin and a playful wink, he finished by saying "And make sure you come 'round again, you hear? Got lots more stuff to show ya!"

"Yeah, great!" Flynn pretended to beam while pushing Merida and

Rapunzel away. "See ya around! Nice knowin' ya! Bye!"

The door swung closed behind them a few moments later, and light in the tunnel dimmed considerably. Up ahead was a lit torch, and they stumbled through the dark toward it. In the dirt below sat a small round lantern that, once told what it was, Rapunzel showed high interest in. Though he (not really) hated to take away something that fascinated the girl so, Flynn took the lantern back and lit it with the small flame off the torch. Now able to see, the four so-called 'un-likely friends' began walking down the tunnels.

A few minutes of silence that Flynn was honestly enjoying later, he heard Hiccup speak up from somewhere behind him. "Uh, Mer . . . ?"

"Aye?" She replied easily.

"Can I . . . uh, ask you a question?"

"Well, ye just did, but I suppose ye could ask another if y'like."

Flynn could almost feel the awkward coming off the poor kid. He swore to God, if he was planning to ask Princess Pain-in-the-ass to the ball while acting like this, Flynn was going to hit him with the lantern and not care if his lizard ate him. It was almost painful to listen to.

"Uh, right . . . well, um . . . what country are you from, again?"

" . . . why d'ye want to know?"

"Just curious." There was a squeak to Hiccup's voice. It was almost cute. Like a baby yak.

"Scotland. Why?"

"Noreason!" Hiccup coughed. "S-so, uh . . . why'd you leave?"

"Because I wanted to." Her voice was firm and just a tad bit annoyed. Mayday, mayday, abort mission, kid!

"Did you, uh . . . leave anyone behind? Anyone who might . . . uh, miss you?"

"Nae." She hissed, with so much venom that Flynn actually had to stop to look back at the two of them. "Nae, I did not."

Hiccup had flinched down so much his neck disappeared into his shoulders. "Okay?" He offered, swallowing and giving a sheepish grin at the glaring look in her icy eyes. She huffed and crossed her arms, not saying another thing about the subject. Flynn whistled under his breath and the train-wreck attempt at conversation, then turned back ahead. He glanced down at Blondie, her big green eyes transfixed by the golden glow coming off the lantern. Amused, he bobbed his hand a bit, and tried not to laugh at how her eyes followed the little candle inside.

"Is it nicer seeing them up close?" He asked, raising an

eyebrow.

She blinked, straightening up again as if just now realizing she'd been staring at the contraption like it was her first ever Christmas present. "What? Oh, uh . . . yeah, sort of," She admitted, grinning sheepishly. Flynn shook his head. How someone could be continuously so perky all the time was beyond him. Did the fact they were almost attacked and kidnapped by kingdom guards just fly right over that head of golden hair? Well . . . she was blond . . . so he supposed that made sense.

"So," He began again, examining a skewered skeleton tacked to the wall with a large cutlass. Pirate style. He approved. "Back there? Didn't think you had that in ya. It was pretty . . . impressive."

"I know!" She exclaimed, ever cheery, every optimistic. But a second later she contained herself and repeated, calmer, "I know."

Flynn chuckled. Seemed she was starting to learn to control her mood swings. Good for her.

"Soo," She repeated him and it got a raised eyebrow out of him. "Flynn . . . where ya from?"

"Woah-woah," Flynn yanked the breaks on this train of thought as quick as it started. "Sorry, Blondie, I don't do backstory." He glanced at her and smirked at the curious pout on her face. "However," He continued. "I'm becoming very interested in yours."

She blinked, like, 'Really?'. .

"Now, I know I'm not supposed to mention the hair,"

"Nope," She clarified.

"Or, the mother,"

"Uh-uh."

"Frankly, I'm too scared to ask about the frog,"

"Chameleon," She corrected, mimicking his face of wry amusement. It actually looked good on her. Made her look smarter than she really was.

"Nuance," He waved it away. "Here's my question though. If you've wanted to see the lanterns so badly, why haven't you ever gone before?" It was an honest question, something he really was curious about.

Rapunzel stopped walking, startled. "I- . . . uh," Oh no. That usually started the 'it's a long story' line. "Well-"

She was interrupted by a pebble landing on her head. She blinked and looked down at where it landed, watching as the other rocks started to tremble slightly in their spots. "Uh, guys?" She said nervously, looking back at Hiccup and Merida whose faces started to morph to match hers.

Far behind them, the tunnel was slowly starting to illuminate. The sound of running footsteps was getting closer.

"Guys?!" She repeated, voice shrill as the group of guards from back at the Snuggly Duckling came around the corner alarmingly fast.

"\_RIDER!\_"

"Run," Flynn whispered. "RUN!"

Hiccup and Merida put aside their mini-argument to grab handfuls of Rapunzel's hair, and the four of them proceeded to book it. The end of the tunnel came alarmingly fast, and the sudden sunlight on their faces blinded them all for a brief moment.

The tunnel opened out into a small canyon, barely a quarter-mile around. They stood on an open ledge, and behind them was the large wooden wall of the dam Hook-hand-guy was talking about. "There's the rope ladder!" Hiccup pointed at it. "Let's get down before-"

He was cut off when, down below, one of the boarded-up tunnels were smashed away, letting the Stabington brothers into the canyon. What the hell! Flynn could have sworn that the guards had them handcuffed! They didn't just leave them unguarded, did they!?

"Uh," Hiccup blinked. "Who is that?"

"They don't like me," Flynn replied, whirling around when the palace guards came bursting out behind them.

"Who are they?" Merida asked, eyes shifting around like she was looking for something.

"They don't like me either," Flynn gulped.

Then, as if this situation wasn't bad enough, the damn white horse from that morning came back, neighing like he thought he was Hiccup's lizard. "Who is \_that?!\_" Rapunzel yelled. Flynn grabbed her shoulders.

"Let's just all assume that everyone in here \_doesn't like me!\_" He ordered them all, exasperated and no, no, most certainly not terrified. Without warning, Rapunzel slammed her frying pan into Flynn's stomach with a curt: 'Here!'

He grunted at the hit and looked at her, but she was already grabbing Hiccup's arm and throwing her hair over one of the beams holding up the massive dam. The brunette had no single clue what she was doing, so when the blonde tightened her grip on her hair and leaped off the ledge, dragging him with her, he let out a very loud and very unmanly scream.

She landed on the next ledge with almost practiced ease, and for some reason Flynn was greatly annoyed at how the kid was clinging to her for dear life.

"Rider!" Merida hissed, and Flynn spun back around to find the head of the palace guards to be advancing on the two of them with weirdly pleased but furious look in his eyes. "I waited a loong time for

this," He growled, tossing his torch away without a single care. Flynn looked down at the curly-haired girl on one side of him, then at the frying pan in his other hand. He made a little noise of distress. He was going to die here, wasn't he?

The head guard drew his sword and lunged. Flynn reacted without thinking, quickly smashing the side of the guard's head with the pan and creating a rather pleasing '\_CLANG\_' noise when the pan connected to his shiny gold helmet. Quick as lightning, Merida snatched his sword out of the air and spun it around her fingertips like a goddamn expert swordsman, pointing it at the remaining guards with only a sarcastic "Thank ye," in gratitude.

"You're welcome," Flynn muttered, and together they jumped into the fray. Merida deflected every sharp blade coming at them like it was her job, disarming every guard just in time for Flynn to bring down the wrath of the Breakfast-Food Gods on their helmets. It was over in seconds, and as they stood there above the unconscious group of at least seven guards, Flynn held up the frying pan again.

"Oh mama!" He cried. "I have got to get me one of \_these!\_"

Another sword came at them, and Flynn held up the pan again in an 'En garde!' pose. He stared at the last standing 'swordsman' in disbelief.

It was the horse. The horse that was a pain in his ass all day long. He was holding a dropped sword between his teeth, growling and whinnying threateningly. "You 'ave \_got\_ to be kidding me," Merida muttered. Flynn agreed with her completely.

The sword fight with the horse was ten times worse than the one against the men. It was like the horse knew how to fight better than the actual guards did! Who taught a horse how to use a sword, anyway!? He alternated between going at Flynn and going at Merida, leaving the two of them scrambling over each other for a chunk of horsehide. It was more frustrating than anything. They were doing okay with it, that is, until the horse decided it would be funny to knock the frying pan out of Flynn's hand. The three of them watched it fall over the edge, standing and waiting for the distant echoing clang that was it hitting the bottom. Flynn glanced back at the horse. "Uh . . . how about two out of three?" He suggested, grinning.

The horse didn't seem to approve. Flynn couldn't tell. There was a sword in his face.

"Flynn!" Blondie's voice called, and a second later the end of her hair was wrapping around his right hand. He looked at it, blinked, then grinned.

"Hey, Ginge, our ride's here."

Her eyes widened and he grabbed her by the sleeve of her dress, tucking her under his arm as Rapunzel with startling strength yanked the two of them straight off the ledge. To her credit, Merida didn't scream while they were flying through the air, swinging like Tarzan in the jungle. But she did cling to him rather tightly. That was stangely amusing.

"Flynn!" Blondie called from above them. "Look out!"

Flynn looked back down, and yelped when he realized he was swinging right toward the business ends of the Stabbinton brothers' swords. "Hang on Ginger!" Flynn ordered, then winced when her grip turned almost bruising around his ribs. Rapunzel gave her hair a sharp pull, lifting him and Merida just enough to sail harmlessly over the murderous duo's heads. "Ha!" He shouted over his shoulder at them, having to gloat about it even though they weren't exactly out of danger yet. "You should see your faces! Because you look-"

"Rider!" Merida cried out.

His stomach slammed into a beam sticking out of the dam's drain canal. "-ridiculous . . ." He finished, wheezing.

Merida scrambled onto the beam before he could drop her, taking his hand and pulling him up after her. Pounding caught their attention, and when they turned around it was to see the horse was slamming his hind legs against yet another support beam. Behind him, the guards were starting to come to again, and just in time too. For them. Because the horse succeeded in knocking the beam out. It busted a hole in the dam, but created an efficient bridge for them to cross to get to Rapunzel and Hiccup.

"Shit," Flynn frowned, trying to think quickly. Merida, thinking quicker, took Rapunzel's hair and wrapped most of it around the beam that hit him. Stupid beam. She took a firm grip on it, ordered Flynn to do the same, then called out to the other two.

"Hiccup! Rapunzel! Jump!"

Rapunzel knew what the other girl was doing instantly. Like girly-telepathy was going on. She grabbed Hiccup around the waist and drew another unmanly squeak out of him. They ran for the edge, Hiccup clinging to Rapunzel all over again.

They jumped off the ledge, and for a moment, one split second, it looked like the horse was going to catch them. His teeth were literal inches away from Blondie's hair. They were in mid-air, falling in slow motion, and Flynn held his breath. Would they-

The horse's teeth closed without a single golden hair trapped between them. Flynn's breath came rushing out through his nose and he helped Merida quickly swing them to the ground. They skidded across a large puddle of water, soaking Hiccup's cloth boots but who cared anyway. They were alive, right?

"Come on, ye!" The ginger girl shouted, grabbing Flynn by the arm and dragging him with her as they ran and slid down the drain canal. Their combined weight, however, was too much for the waterlogged and most likely old wood, and after a short moment of Slip n' Slide, they found themselves knocking the entire thing over as they fell.

There was no time to catch their breath. The second their feet hit the rough ground and they rolled and stumbled to get their footing back, the wood of the dam burst. A heartbeat later, one second of Flynn's mind declaring \_Oh fuck \_later, he was grabbing Rapunzel's shoulder and shoving her forward. He grabbed Hiccup's upper arm, interrupting his attempt to whistle for some damn reason. "\_Run \_you

idiot!" He shouted, shoving the younger male toward the nearest escape exit: the entrance to the mine directly behind him.

Flynn bent to scoop up handfuls of Rapunzel's hair as they ran, Hiccup's hand on Merida's wrist (\_aw, that's kind of cute- FOCUS!\_) to lead the redhead. A creak and a groan rocked the ground under their feet, and with horror Flynn realized that one of the boulders used for a walkway was buckling under the water's force.

He shoved Rapunzel into the tunnel, tossing her balled up hair into her arms. He stood at the entrance, making sure the kid and Curly Top made it in too. Water pooling around his feet, the thief had just enough time to grab the frying pan the damn horse knocked from his hand before the boulder came crashing down.

The crumbling slam doomed the young four to darkness and rushing water, with all the air of a coffin lid sliding home.

Flynn turned to look up at his three 'unlikely friends' as the water continued to rise around his feet. It was pitch black, but his eyes were adjusting, and he could see them, faces pale and terrified, staring back.

\* \* \*

><p><em>~Castle Dun'Broch~<em>

"Your majesties," The young guard bowed to his knees on the stone floor. He bowed his head and removed his helmet. "I am afraid . . . your daughter is dead."

And the floor dropped out from under Queen Elinor's feet.

## 10. Nine: And Now for Something Different

\*\*Hey guys! Bit shorter than usual but I hope y'all don't mind since this one came a bit ealier than usual ^^0 love you all! Kisses!  
:3\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter Nine: <strong>And Now for Something Completely Different

\* \* \*

><p><em>~Berk~<em>

Astrid Hofferson could probably list off the things she liked on one hand. She liked Dragon Training. She like killing things. She liked the sound of sharpening her favorite axe with a shiny river stone. She liked knowing that a particularly bad wound would always scar and leave a story behind, just like the ones that caressed her father's face.

On the other hand, the things she hated would take much longer to rattle off. But it pleased her to know that at the very top of the list, in big, bold letters, was the name \*\*HICCUP HORRENDOUS HADDOCK THE THIRD, \*\*scribbled out several times and surrounded by numerous



gaping holes courtesy of using the paper as target practice. Not that she was aiming at his name. Or if she scribbled a very quick very crude drawing of the brunette on the back and used that, tacked up to a tree several hundred feet from the village so no one could hear her shouting curses at the top of her lungs.

It wasn't fair. It was childish of her to say so, but it just . . . wasn't.

Hiccup, the literal hiccup of her entire generation, had been a complete screw up for just shy of fifteen years- and after just a couple of sloppy (\_so sloppy . . . ugh . . . what was he even thinking half the time?! Was he actively trying to get them all killed?!\_) days in training, he suddenly started acting . . . half-competent. And then more than half competent. Then- oh \_ho\_- and \_then\_- he actually started to \_steal her thunder.\_ Thunder her father had once claimed Thor had blessed her with personally. Haddock had turned moving up in his skills into a personal insult against her, and she would not stand for it.

Or at least she wouldn't have, if the little troll hadn't skipped the village.

The scheduled final test- the honor of killing the Monstrous Nightmare (\_an honor she felt belonged to her and her alone\_, Astrid added to herself bitterly) had been two weeks ago, and Hiccup still had not returned from his so-called 'Mystery Adventures'. Finally the chief had decided that this was no little Hiccup random disappearance, and sent for a search party to find his son and bring him home. That was last week, and they didn't find anything. It was like the guy just vanished out of nowhere.

She kind of figured he wouldn't be able to go through with it. He had always been a coward, ever since they were kids. It made sense to her that he would run away at the thought of killing anything. He was just too squeamish.

Good riddance to bad rubbish, if you asked her. At least, that's what she would say, if training hadn't been put on hold to look for him. She couldn't really blame them, though. Deep down she knew it was a big, bad thing that the Chief's son was missing, but she was too blinded by immature fury to care. There were hundreds of worst-case scenarios that would most likely be going through the adults' heads. He could have tripped and injured his foot or ankle and couldn't walk, starving to death calling for help. Or he could have gotten snagged by Outcasts and was being held for ransom. Or he could have just gotten eaten.

There were countless explanations for her to choose from.

"Hey." Ruffnut said over her shoulder, sitting up a little on the barrel she was perched on. Astrid gave her a raised eyebrow and followed her line of sight. It was Gobber, casually limping his way toward them and nodding to the girls.

It was a usual afternoon on Berk. The sky was cloudy and overcast, and the wind tried repeatedly to chill the villagers bones through the thick skin, without much success. Astrid had been invited (forced) to spend the day with her best friend, and currently they were lounging by the blacksmiths' hut, fiddling with their weapons.

Astrid set her axe down and stood to greet their teacher. He waved her to sit back down, however.

"Wassup?" Ruffnut asked, at the same time Astrid noticed a particularly grave expression on the man's face.

Gobber rubbed the bridge of his nose and heaved a sigh. "Stoick has decided to take the search off the island."

Ruffnut sat up straighter. "What? Really?" Her face showed the annoyed frustration Astrid was mature enough to not display. "Why doesn't he just give up already? Loser's probably Nadder food by now."

Gobber sent her a icy look and shook his hook at her. "You should show him a bit more respect. You know Stoick's been off his rocker trying to find his son. Yer parents would be, too, if you went missin'."

Ruffnut made a face, then laughed. "Doubt it! Pap's too busy gettin' drunk every night! Probably look right at Tuff and wonder where the hell his is!"

Astrid rolled her eyes and Gobber shook his head, not about to argue with the rebellious girl. He walked past them and opened the doors to the shop, and deciding that she had nothing better to do, Astrid followed him. She noticed that his eyes trailed briefly toward a second set of tools, and a smock that looked far too small for the large man to use . . . it took her a moment, but she remember that before he was enrolled in dragon-training, Hiccup was Gobber's apprentice.

" . . . so you're going with them, then?" Astrid asked her teacher, watching him pull a large canvas tarp out from under his work table. He nodded, taking weapons down from the racks on the walls.

"I have to." Gobber eyed one of the prosthetics for his hook and added it to the pile. "Stoick needs me."

Astrid frowned. "What about training?"

Gobber huffed. "Honestly, Astrid. The Chief's son is missing and that's all you can think about?"

Her eyebrows furrowed and she pursed her lips, indignant. Gobber took out a strip of leather and tied it around the bundle of weapons, lifting it onto his shoulder. He nodded to another leather sac, this one presumably with his clothes and things. "Carry that for me, will you?"

Astrid did so, lifting the strap over her shoulder and following after him. Ruffnut had disappeared, most likely off to torture some innocent village children. Or her brother.

Astrid followed Gobber through the village and down to the pier. Several boats were being loaded with cargo, which surprised her. Almost as many people who went to hunt down the dragon's nest a few weeks ago were getting together trying to find Hiccup. She assumed most of them were forced into it by Stoick. Would they really be here for any other reason?

Gobber jumped into the boat with an agiliness that looked unusual with his stocky build. He set the weapons down and motioned for Astrid to give him the other bag. He set it down, then began to help others load baskets of fish and food on board. She started to help as well, and just as she was handing a basket that smelled strongly of skins of wine, Gobber spoke up.

"Listen, Astrid. While I'm gone, there's something I need ya t'do."

"Of course." She replied, easily. If she wouldn't be training then she'd have plenty of time for other, side tasks.

"I know ya may not be happy with getting assigned to this, but it's important, and I can't really trust anybody else with it."

"What do you need me to do?"

Gobber glanced away, then back. He grabbed for another basket of fish and handed it off to one of the brawny seamstresses. Astrid waved at her. She was the brilliant woman who made a dye for her mother that made wool blue as the sky. Astrid liked her. She made her favorite top for her last birthday. She was also quite good with a mace. Both skills were respectable in Astrid's eyes.

"-dragons while I'm gone."

"Excuse me?" Astrid mentally kicked herself for the laps in attention.

"I said I need ya to feed the dragons at the arena while I'm gone." Gobber repeated. The surprise must have shown on her face, because he was quick to continue. "Now, I know yer not the most . . . friendly to them creatures, but my only other choices are the twins, Snotlout and Fishlegs, and they, well . . . " He continued on, but Astrid had heard enough and stopped listening.

Astrid stared at him. It was true, she probably was the most trustworthy of all the trainees . . . but feeding the dragons? The dragons she spent most of her life learning to fight from? Being able to smash a war hammer into without a second thought?

And he expected her to feed them?

"Alright." She accepted the task. Gobber blinked at her, surprised she agreed. He'd been going on that whole time trying to convince her, hadn't he?

"You'll do it?" He asked.

"I'll do it." It wasn't like she'd have anything better to do.

"Oh. Well. Good then." Gobber scratched his head. "That's- that's great actually." One of the other men from the village, Fishlegs' uncle, Astrid believed, called out to him, asking for some help loading the extra sails. Extra sails. That amused her slightly. Well, she couldn't say that Vikings were stupid. They learned pretty quick. Especially after one-too-many fireballs were thrown through them. Better to be safe than sorry.

"When are you going to leave?" Astrid asked when she got his attention again.

"Probably tomorrow morning." He grunted, pulling hard on a rope to secure the riggings. "I'll leave everything out for you. If we're gone longer than a week, you can ask Dominik to catch you more fish."

Astrid nodded. Dominik was the same fisherman who delivered to her mother every Thursday. "I will."

Gobber nodded and offered her a many-toothless grin, but that grin melted instantly and his eyes quickly focused on something over her shoulder. Astrid turned, spotting Stoick to be coming down the stairs toward the loading fleet.

If you asked Astrid to describe the chief in a single word, she would use 'hurricane'. He was vast, befitting of his name. Powerful and relentless, she'd often see him fighting along side her father when the dragons came. He was tall, towering over nearly everyone in the village, and was easily strongest of them all. Sometimes she wondered where his genes went. From what she'd heard about Hiccup's mother, she had been slender, sure, but no way as clumsy and idiot as Hiccup. There was just no way.

Stoick nodded at Astrid when he arrived. "Are we almost ready?" He asked Gobber, face and voice void of any emotion. Gobber climbed back up onto the dock and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Almost." Gobber removed his hand a second later. "The men just need a few more hours to finish-"

Stoick turned to Astrid. "Don't you have something you should doing?"

"Yes, sir," She nodded and turned to leave, knowing a hint to scam when she heard one.

"Listen, Stoick, I know you're worried, but do you really need to take it out on the kids? . . . "

Astrid ignored them and went on her way, not bothering to stay behind and listen to the chief's response. Right now, she had to figure out how she was going to feed the dragons . . . without killing them, or getting herself killed.

\* \* \*

><p><em>~Castle Dun'Broch~<em>

"Thank you, Duncan," Queen Elinor was quick to compose herself, schooling her face back into a cool expressionless mask even as she listened to her husband's heart crack, and her sons let out identical murmurs of distress. She bowed her head to the guard bent down on one knee before the thrones. "For informing us of your . . . " She searched her head for the right words. "Discovery. That will be all." She turned to the rest of the castle guards and nodded once. "You are all dismissed."

It only took a few moments before the guards were back to standing at their posts, and once the great hall was emptied again Elinor rested a hand to her creased forehead and heaved a light sigh.

There was a tug on her dress and the Queen looked down. It was Hamish- or at least, she assumed it was Hamish. The only one who could ever really tell her sons apart was . . .

"Merry comin' home?" Hubert asked, his voice soft as he held his wooden toy sword against his chest.

"Want Merry." Harris agreed, and oh, bless her heart, the poor little ones looked ready to cry. Of course, she wanted very much to cry too. She wasn't above admitting it, if only to herself. But she couldn't allow herself that small luxury. Not now. Not here.

"Oh, my dears," Elinor sighed, bending to wrap her sons in her arms. She was too proud to allow herself to break down, but . . . at the very least she could afford to be a mother. If she had realized that sooner, then maybe . . . just maybe . . . Merida wouldn't have . . .

The tears were running and almost instantly Fergus's arms were around the four of them, collecting them all into his arms. He tucked Elinor's head under his chin just like he did when they were younger, when they were first betrothed and he was a skinny, scrawny little thing. It made her feel safe and secure then, just like it did now.

She let the tears fall, and didn't care who saw. She was a mother. The mother of a dead daughter. And she was allowed to mourn.

"Hush, now, love," Fergus murmured, his lips against her temple. "Hush now . . . hush now . . . love, boys . . . it's . . . it's going to be alright. It's going to be alright now. I-It's going to b-be alright . . . "

Elinor refused to acknowledge that her husband was crying. She couldn't afford to. Instead, she made sure to hold her boys tighter. If she lost them to . . .

She couldn't afford to even think it.

\* \* \*

><p>Duncan pulled his helmet off and scratched at his auburn head, walking briskly toward the front gates. He looked around nervously, shifting back and forth as he stepped out onto the cobblestone bridge. Where was she? The moon was in the right position, wasn't it? Oh lord, if he was caught away from his post-<p>

"Did you deliver the message?"

Duncan yelped and turned around.

She was standing there, cloaked in black and mist, neon green eyes bright against the darkness of the night. Her grin was a spiral of sharp white teeth. She stalked closer, like a wolf after her prey, and tapped Duncan lightly on the nose. "Well?" She purred.

The guardsman nodded. "A-aye, my lady . . . I told them exactly what you said. That the Princess threw herself off the waterfall to the west . . . and that Mor'du claimed her body when I went to investigate."

She giggled. "\_Perfect.\_ We'll see my beloved on the throne yet, won't we, pet?" Duncan nodded nervously, shuddering as her nails patted him on the shoulder. "You've done well, darling. Go on now, back to your position. Wouldn't want you to get into any . . . trouble."

She winked one poison-green eye and turned, swishing her cloak around her ankles as she went on her way. Duncan watched her leave until her shape vanished between the trees, then turned to return to his post. He wished he wasn't so timid . . . then maybe he wouldn't be wrapped up in such a horrible mess as this one.

As the young guard returned to his place at the front gate of the castle, he turned to face the full moon. Somewhere out in the forest, he heard a wolf howl. He shivered and closed his eyes, trying to shake his feeling of dread.

Debts to witches are hell to repay.

## 11. Ten: The Open Air

**\*\*Hey all! Hope you've been having a grand-ol' time entertaining yourselves while I've been gone ^^0 thank you all for your patience! Here's a brand-new chapter, all ready for ya!\*\***

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter Ten: <strong>The Open Air

\* \* \*

><p><em>~Dun'Broch~<em>

Matilda threw down her hood and shook out her hair, blinking her eyes innocently as she sashayed casually into the Macintosh camp.

Since the (admittedly convenient disappearance of the crown princess, the three lord clans had remained in Dun'Broch to help in the search for her. A search she was sure would end soon enough. Which was all well and good, suiting her just fine. She actually would thank the redheaded twit, if she got the chance. Her running away had made things . . . remarkably easier.

And it wasn't like she didn't \_do\_ anything about her disappearance. Matilda had- at the request of her beloved- spread the word of the missing princess. Magically, of course. Sometimes she wondered why everyone didn't have magic, but then she realized that if everyone had magic, \_she\_ wouldn't be magical. She'd be ordinary.

Matilda of the Macintosh clan was anything \_but\_ ordinary.

"Hello, sirs," She greeted with a deep curtsy to a few passing men, some of her beloved's guards no doubt. The men looked at her oddly but Matilda kept on her way, footsteps light and head held high. She

noticed a small group already beginning to take down some of the tents toward the edge of camp. Goodness, news sure traveled fast up here in the highlands! (Hee hee!)

Matilda curled a strand of her wavy black hair around her pale finger as she followed the lanterns to the largest tent in the center of the camp. A small group of village girls was standing around the entrance- hoping for a glimpse of her beloved, no doubt.

Matilda would have to fix that now, wouldn't she?

Collecting a commanding air around herself, she strode toward those girls and stuck her face toward the air. "Excuse me!" She called, scaring the life out of the girls. There was only three of them, with dirty straw-colored hair.

"Don't you all have something you should be doing?" Matilda asked sweetly, putting just enough of an order into her tone so her magic would catch. The girls looked around at each other in confusion for a moment before they smiled and greeted Matilda warmly, before telling her that they each had a job from the Lord that they must do immediately. Matilda smiled as they left, pleased.

Then she turned and entered the tent with a flourish. "Hello, beloved!" She greeted with a wide smile.

Young Macintosh was staring at his reflection in his favorite (enchanted, but he didn't need to know that) sword. He barely looked up as Matilda entered, but that was alright, that was just him. "I did what you asked!" She said cheerfully, brushing idly and sneering down at a burr in her gown. This part of the country was . . . ugh. There weren't enough words to describe her disgust.

"Oh, you did?" He looked up at her and half of his mouth quirked into a smile. "Great, thanks. Da will be glad you did. One step closer to finding the princess."

Matilda was careful to not let her smile twitch too badly. She supposed he'd hear of the 'body' the Dun'Broch guards 'found' at the bottom of the waterfall. It was just some random village girl with hair magically dyed to the right color. By the time they fished her out there wouldn't be a face left to recognize. And that was fine with Matilda. Frankly, she supposed it suited both herself and the runaway princess. If she really was gone for good, then it kept her clan from looking for her, and it kept that curly haired idiot away from her beloved!

It was perfection!

However . . .

"What do you think your father will do if they don't find her?" Matilda asked, pausing to recalculate her plan. She was quick to realize that because she'd magically pushed the image of the missing princess across the seas, it could be easier to find her if she ended up there. She would have to issue another message detailing her death. Soon. Before things began to get out of hand.

She turned and found her beloved to be giving her a curious look. "The men will find her."

Matilda laughed, the sound musical and light, just like she practiced. She approached her beloved and put her hands on his shoulders. "Come now. You must admit that you thought of what might happen!"

Young Macintosh frowned, setting his sword down to think. " . . . I suppose then . . . if they can't find the princess . . . Da and the others would have to choose."

\_Yes,\_ Matilda purred to herself. The country would fall to ruin, war-torn by indecision Her beloved on the front lines. With his power and her magic, he would be king.

And it would be Matilda on that throne. Oh yes. Queen of Scotland was a . . . step down from her ambitions, admittedly, but oh what fun she could have with the crown in hand.

She squeezed her beloved's shoulders, coiling a bit of her magic around his mind so everything she said became much more agreeable. "Everything will fall into place very, very soon . . . "

"Whatever you say."

\* \* \*

><p>~<em>Corona~<em>

The second the boulder slammed home, and darkness swallowed all the light, Merida knew they were going to die.

Water was rushing in at their feet, rising every second they wasted standing there. The four of them quickly scrambled for the other side of the entrance, only to discover just a second too late that this was the caved-in mine Hook-Hand Guy had warned them about.

It took only a split second before the four of them sprang into action. Flynn started to try shoving at the rocks in the wall, trying in vain to knock them out of the way. Hiccup moved to help. Rapunzel and Merida took out their pan and sword and tried to smack or stab the rocks away.

Nothing was working.

Flynn was clawing at the rocks, doing his very best to make them budge. He didn't give up until his hand slipped, and he cursed loudly before giving up and turning to dive into the water. Hiccup pulled and shoved as hard as he could, but it wasn't working.

Nothing was working.

The water was rising even higher. The faint hiss in the background was a constant reminder of their impending deaths. Oh, God, have mercy . . .

Flynn's head broke the surface, gasping. "It's no use!" He sputtered. "I can't see anything!"

Rapunzel sucked in a deep breath, imitating Flynn, and dove under. The thief was quick to grab her, pulling her back out of the water.



"There's no point!" He told her sternly, brushing wet hair out of her eyes. "It's pitch black down there!"

A sharp noise, like a wounded animal made them turn. It was a long moment before Merida realized they were all staring at her in the dark. Even longer before she realized that noise had been \_her.\_

Merida turned away from the wall and pressed her back against it, rough stones jabbing at her back. Her breath was deep and ragged, and she was shaking.

"M-Mer?" Hiccup called. Her head turned toward him, only about a foot away but she could still barely see him. " . . . are you alright?"

"A-aye," She croaked, swallowing. Her stomach felt like it was tying itself into knots. Her throat was dry and scratchy, and she was shaking terribly. "M'fine."

They were silent. It was deafening. Merida squeezed her eyes shut. She did not want to die here. In a caved-in mine. She . . . she wanted to die outside. In the forest. Under the trees and the wide open sky. In her own bed. In her mother's arms. Oh, God almighty, have mercy please . . .

"Merida." Hiccup spoke up again, somehow finding her shoulder in the dark. "You're not okay."

His voice was so calm. He didn't sound like he was freezing, or shuddering as violently as Merida was. All of the sudden, a spark of anger flew down her spine, and she lashed out with a splash. "\_Nay!\_ I am \_not\_ 'alright'! I-" She stopped herself, sucking down air to try and calm herself. The water was nearly past her stomach now, and rising fast.

" . . . Mer," Hiccup's voice was gentle. " . . . are you claustrophobic?"

"N-\_Nay!\_" She yelped, shaking her head and getting wet curls everywhere. Claustrophobic Who, her? Dun'Broch's bear princess? The wild heart of the highlands? A \_claustrophobic?\_ "H-how dare ye assume so! I-I am perfectly \_fine! \_D-don't ye d-\_dare- I-\_" Was the air getting thinner in here? Oh God. Oh God, get her out. Get her out get her out \_get me out of here-!\_"

"Merida!" Hiccup grabbed her arms and shook her once, not hard, just enough to get her attention. She could just barely make out his face, his green eyes close and wide and gentle. "I-It's alright, alright? We're . . . we're gonna be alright."

Merida stared at him. 'Alright'? They were going to be 'alright'?! "Hiccup . . . " She whispered, voice soft. "We . . . we're going t'die . . . aren't we?"

Rapunzel let out a choked, sobbing noise that sounded like a quiet "I'm sorry . . . "

Merida's breath began to come very fast, very choppy. "I-I-I-I d-donnae want to die-oh Gods above- I don't-I can't- not here not now

oh god-" She was babbling like a madwoman, wasn't she? She should stop. Why couldn't she stop-

Two hands suddenly grabbed her face and shut the long string of nonsense down in a second flat. Merida focused on the face only inches away from hers, big green eyes staring at her through the dark. His thumbs brushed her hair away from her face. " . . .  
"

Hiccup took a deep breath.

"\_W-when the cold winds are c-calling,  
>A-and the sky is clear and b-bright-<em>"

"Really?" Flynn complained. "You have to start singing now of all times?"

"Sh-shut up!" Hiccup sounded flustered. He took another breath.

>"<em>M-misty mountains sing and beckon,<br>L-lead me out, into the light,  
>I w-will ride . . . I will fly,<br>C-chase the wind and touch the sk-sky . . .  
>I will f-fly,<br>C-chase the wind and t-touch the sky.\_"

Merida rubbed her face with the soaked sleeve of her dress and looked at Hiccup miserably. "I donnae understand," She murmured. He sighed.

"That was . . . a lullaby " He admitted awkwardly. "It . . . my . . .  
" He swallowed. "My mother used to . . . to sing that to me, b-before she . . . died. Whenever I was afraid."

Merida stared at him. " . . . yer mother is dead?"

She felt him nod more than she saw it.

"I'm sorry."

Hiccup shook his head. "I-it's not your fault. I was little when she died-well, littl\_er\_, anyway." He sighed. "Dad used to tell me that we'd see her again. I just didn't think . . . it would be so soon."

Rapunzel made the noise again.

Merida sniffled, and looked around at her friend . . . s. Friends. She supposed she could call them that now. Might as well. She swallowed and leaned a little into his arm, needing some warmth and support. The water was inching up their chests.

" . . . I'm-"

"I'm a viking."

Merida snapped her head around so fast she almost hit Flynn in the face with her hair. "W-what?!"

Hiccup heaved a sigh. "I am a viking." He repeated, firmer. "I'm from the island of Berk, to the far north. The chief's son. I'm an

embaressment to my father and the entire tribe. So I ran away." He glared at the water. " . . . I just felt the need to say that."

Merida stared at him, at the place where their shoulders were touching. Hiccup was . . . a viking? She had heard stories from her mother during the lessons, that it was the men with horned helmets that fought against the four clans before her father became king. Hiccup . . . the boy she'd known for a while now, perhaps her only real friend in the world . . . was one of them?

He looked down at her. "I saw you on a missing poster back in the thug Duckling place . . . you don't have to tell me, and I shouldn't ask, but-"

"I'm the first born of the clan Dun'Broch." Merida interrupted, her voice unwavering no matter how badly she was shivering. "Princess of Scotland."

Hiccup stared at her. She stared back.

"Princess?" He squeaked.

"Aye."

"I kidnapped a princess?"

" . . . aye?"

She heard a small thunk as his head hit the wall behind him.

" . . . Eugene."

Hiccup, Merida, and Rapunzel all turned to where Flynn was across from them. He looked up with a sigh and a slight, not quite there smile. "My real name. It's Eugene Fitzherbert. I figured someone ought to know. And well, I couldn't resist getting to be a part of this confessional love-fest or whatever it is you two have going on." He waved at them. "Don't mind me, continue as if we're not here."

Rapunzel whacked him lightly on the arm, laughing like if she didn't, she'd burst into tears. "B-be nice." She scolded lightly, nuzzling the chameleon on her shoulder.

Flynn chuckled, but the sound was dark. Empty. "What about you, blondie?" He said, words a bit harsh but tone surprisingly gentle. "Anything you want to get off your chest before . . . " He trailed off.

The water was at his shoulders.

Rapunzel rubbed her nose and grinned weakly. "I have magic hair that glows when I sing."

Flynn's tone was remarkably deadpan. "What."

"I- . . . I have . . . magic hair that glows when I sing!" Rapunzel repeated, eyes slowly widening as realization began to dawn in her eyes. She smacked herself in the forehead at her idiocy for

not thinking of it sooner.

The water came to their chins. Rapunzel used her last breath to gasp out:

"\_Flower gleam and glow!  
>Let your power SHINE!<em>"

Before the water filled their small cavern completely.

The dark swallowed everything. Merida wasn't sure if her eyes were even open. It was cold, like little needles jabbing at her skin everywhere. \_This isn't how I wanted to die . . . \_

A hand caught hers in the dark. Gripped tight. She was going to die. But she wouldn't be alone.

\_Flower gleam and glow . . . \_

Butter-yellow light sparkled across Rapunzel's scalp. A sudden warmth flooded the small cavern, rising the temperature of the water. The glow traveled down Rapunzel's several dozen feet of hair, and Merida found herself following it with her eyes. The burn in her chest from lack of air as getting less and less painful. She had nearly lost all her breath when she saw that Rapunzel's hair \_did\_ in fact glow.

Flynn did almost loose his breath. Merida heard the bubbles rush out of his mouth before he grabbed his lips to hold them shut.

Hiccup hit him in the arm then pointed with his other hand to a bit of Rapunzel's hair, following the flow of the water toward one wall. His point was clear. That was the way out!

Grabbing their things from where they sank to the bottom, all four started grabbing at rocks as fast as they could. The glow from Rapunzel's hair was starting to fade. They worked faster.

The light dimmed before they could finish but they still worked. Their combined effort was more that enough, and before they knew it the stone wall was crumbling and the water came rushing out all at once, dragging the four bodies inside out with it.

## 12. Eleven: Bonds

\*\*Guess who's back in town, nerds ;P thanks so much for your patience, you guys! Anyway, read on y'all.\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter Eleven:<strong> Bonds

\* \* \*

><p><em>~Corona~<em>

Hiccup's head broke the water once before he was pulled down again by the current rushing past him. In that short time, he was able to get about half his lungs full of air, and the other half full of water.

The current swept him and the others straight out of the watery tomb and into the river outside.

It took a lot of flailing around and panicked splashing but he managed to make it to a river bank. He threw himself out of the water and clung desperately at the dirt and grass. He sucked down large mouthfuls of air and coughed up a bit too much water to feel, sound, or look pleasant, but he was alive. He closed his eyes and laid against the soft mossy grass, chest heaving. He was having a hard time trying to calm his racing heart. That was a bit more terror than he was expecting to get this morning.

He heard a splash and opened his eyes, picking himself up and turning around. He flipped his dripping bangs out of his eyes so he should see.

Rapunzel and Flynn (he supposed he should call him Eugene now) were laying on the other side of the bank, and Hiccup groaned. He was going to have to swim across now, wasn't he? Great.

Merida surfaced a few meters away from Hiccup down the river, and like Hiccup she dug her hands into the dirt and clawed herself up to the bank.

He laid still to catch his breath for a few moments before moving to sit up, shaking wet hair out of his eyes. "You alright?" He called to her.

She jumped a bit and had to toss some of her (considerably flattened) curls away from her face. Her blue eyes spotted him easily. She smiled and waved, then promptly fell on to her side and started shaking. Alarmed, Hiccup quickly got to his feet and hurried over.

It wasn't until he was about a yard away from her he realized she was laughing. Dress soaked, red hair a flattened tangle, skin scraped up from the rocks in the river, and the girl was laughing. After the minor freak out she had back in the cave, Hiccup was seriously beginning to question her sanity.

"Are you . . . alright?" He asked again, a bit more cautiously this time.

"Ah-" She paused to take a breath. "Aye! 'M more than fine!" She giggled and pushed herself back upright. "That was fun, aye?"

Hiccup stared at her, eyebrows furrowed slightly. "'Fun'?" He repeated slowly. "We almost drowned!"

"Aye," Merida agreed, holding out a hand. "But we didnae drown, did we?"

Hiccup helped her up and frowned with a bit more disapproval. "Well, no, but we almost did! If Rapunzel's hair didn't . . . glow . . . " He paused. Blinkered. "Her hair glows."

"Aye." Merida agreed, chuckling. "It glows."

He sighed. "If I didn't fly here on a dragon and kidnap a Scottish princess, this would be a lot harder to process."

"Ye didnae kidnap me," Merida huffed. "If anything, I kidnapped \_ye.\_"

"That does not make me feel any better." Hiccup gave her a dull look before turning back to the other side of the river, where Rapunzel was waving at them enthusiastically while trying to fish all her hair out of the water. Merida started using her hands to pull her hair back, and Hiccup couldn't help but notice how long it actually was without all the crazy corkscrews in every direction.

"C'mon!" She said suddenly, startling Hiccup when she grabbed his arm and pulled him back toward the river. "They're waitin' for us."

Getting to the other side of the river was a challenge, but they managed it. Eugene, still looking every bit as shell-shocked as Hiccup supposed he \_should\_ have felt, helped them up the incline and the four of them (five, if he counted Rapunzel's chameleon) trudged sobbing wet through the forest until they found a suitable place to rest.

"Guess it's a good thing we left all yer stuff with Toothless," Merida mentioned to him with a light chuckle after he put his fingers to his lips and sent off a high whistle to call for the dragon. She had a bundle of sticks collected in her arms for firewood, but that wasn't what caught his attention.

Though her body, voice and demeanor made it seem like she was relaxed and completely at ease, Hiccup could easily see the slight tenseness around her eyes when she smiled. It was a good one, but a fake grin all the same. "Mer, are you alright?"

She seemed surprised. "Aye? Why wouldnae I be?"

His raised his eyebrow and looked at her. That must have been enough because she looked back at Rapunzel and Eugene, sitting together and talking quietly on a fallen tree a few yards away. "I \_am\_ fine," She insisted, but in a quieter, more serious tone. "I am \_now\_, anyway." She looked away, but looked back a moment later to put her hand on his shoulder and smile. "Thank ye, Hiccup."

"Don't mention it," He mumbled as she walked away. He watched her drying and violently frizzing hair thoughtfully until a twig snapped behind him. He whirled, and let out a laugh when he found familiar large green eyes staring back. "Hey! There you are, buddy!"

Hiccup led Toothless back to the clearing with the fallen tree. After Merida put the fire pit together with her collected pile of dried grass, sticks, bark and rocks and Toothless lit it for them, she went off back to the river with one of Hiccup's hunting knives. Not even a half-hour later she returned with four large fish, two for Toothless and two for everyone else.

"Who needs camping supplies when you've got a Scottish Princess," Eugene remarked with a slight smirk. Merida glared at him, finished setting the two human-claimed fish on the fire to cook, then sat back against Toothless's stomach. Hiccup was a few feet away, curled up by the dragon's head and scratching lightly at his scales.

"Least I can camp better than ye," She sniffed, turning her nose to the air. Rapunzel giggled, but noticed how Eugene kept flexing his hand and looking at it strangely.

"Are you okay?" She asked, taking his hand into hers and turning it. She gasped at the sight of the gash and the smeared blood across his palm. Eugene quickly pulled it away.

"Just cut it on the rocks." He explained to her. "Don't worry about it. But what I wanna know is--"

"Let me see." Rapunzel firmed her face and pulled his hand back, opening his fist for her poker-faced inspection. She hummed for a moment thoughtfully, then looked around at the faces staring back at her. She sighed. "I can fix that."

"Fix it? Fix what? What are you doing?"

Silently, Rapunzel collected a handful of her magic golden glowing hair began to wrap it around his hand. Eugene stared at her. Everyone stared at her.

Except for Toothless. He was more interested in his fish.

Chewing her lower lip, Rapunzel bowed her head and looked around at the three people collected before her. She sighed. "Just . . . don't freak out, okay?"

"Freak out about \_what?!\_" Hiccup demanded, exasperated. "What else could possibly--"

"Sh," Merida nudged him.

"But--"

"Sh!"

Silenced, but no where near pacified, Hiccup closed his mouth. Rapunzel kept her eyes focused on the task in her hands, refusing to meet the curious and searching eyes staring at her. Once she had wrapped enough hair around Eugene's hand to satisfy herself, she laid it down on her lap and took a deep breath.

"\_Flower, gleam and glow,  
>Let your power shine,<br>Make the clock reverse,  
>Bring back what once was mine . . . <em>"

Just like inside the cavern, the glow began at her scalp, and after a moment, traveled through her roots and down through the cascading locks of golden hair. Her eyes were closed as she sang, face struggling to stay relaxed. A small furrow of nervousness was visible between her brows.

Eugene sat up a little straighter, following the glow as it made its way through Rapunzel's hair and into the knot tied around his hand. He flexed his fingers out and looked up at the chameleon. It smirked and pointed to one of its feet, indicating the spot where he'd injured himself.

"Wha . . . " Hiccup whispered.

"\_Heal what has been hurt,\_  
><em>Change the Fates' design,<br>Bring back what once was mine,  
>What once . . . was mine.<em>"

Her voice echoed through the trees as the song ended, and for a long time, the only sound around their little campsite was the sound of the fire crackling and Toothless breathing. Then, after a few long tense moments, Rapunzel opened her eyes and lifted her gaze, shyly peering up at Eugene from between her lashes. She was tense. Nervous. Eugene pulled his hand away and her fingers were limp as they released him.

He stared at her as he unwrapped her hair. He looked down at his hand, and all the air in his chest rushed out with a high-pitched whimper of "Oh."

"What?" Merida demanded, sitting up on her hands and knees. "What is it?!"

Eugene swallowed thickly and turned his hand around to show them. Aside from a small smear of blood still remaining across his skin, his palm was free of any shape or form of the gash that had been there moments before.

"Oh \_my,\_\_" Merida whispered.

Eugene sucked in a large breath.

"\_Pleasedon'tfreakout!\_" Rapunzel flinched forward before he could scream, her hands held out to him pleadingly. Her face was pinched, worried, looking very close to freaking out herself. She was shaking like a startled doe, ready to collect her hair and bolt at any second.

Eugene let out a dull squeak and coughed, closing his mouth. He closed his fist and tucked it under his chin, rocking a bit on the log. "Freaking out I'm not freaking out are you freaking out I'm just very interested in your hair and the magical properties it possesses how long has it been doing that exactly?"

Hiccup was pretty sure he said all of that in one breath.

Rapunzel let out a shaky chuckle and leaned back. "Forever, I guess?" She shrugged, her smile faint. It faded with a small sigh. "Mother says that . . . when I was a baby, people tried to cut it. She said that . . . people wanted to use its power for vanity, and power. But as soon as it's cut? It just . . . turns brown and loses all it's power."

She leaned forward and turned a bit, pulling the hair off the back of her neck to show everyone the one small spot at the nape of her neck that grew brown, instead of blond. "A gift like that, well, it has to be protected. That's why I never left, and . . . "

"You never . . . left that tower." Hiccup finished for her quietly.

She nodded.



"And . . . you're still going to go back?" Eugene asked.

"No." Rapunzel's shoulders drooped. "Yes?" She dropped her head into her hands. "It's complicated."

Silence depended on them again. The crackling fire sent shadows flickering across their faces. Merida pulled her legs up to her chest and wrapped her arms around her knees with a sigh. Hiccup carefully adjusted the rocks inside the fire with a stick. Eugene stared at his hand. Toothless finished his fish and nuzzled Hiccup's face. Rapunzel let out a deep breath and pulled her hair back out of her face. She chanced a look at Eugene, cleared her throat, and fought for a smile.

"So," She began, changing the subject and catching their attention. "Eugene Fitzherbert, huh?"

Eugene blinked at her, at the two younger teens sitting against the dragon before them, then back. He sighed, dropping his head, but his shoulders shook with a chuckle. "Heh, no getting out of this one, huh?" He shook his head. "Well, I'm not gonna bore you with the tale of poor orphan Eugene Fitzherbert. That's a . . . that one's a bit of a downer."

At this, Rapunzel grinned and scooted a bit closer to him on their log. Taking her lead, Merida lowered and crossed her legs, looking up at Eugene. Hiccup just grinned and scratched Toothless behind his ear-fins. The dragon trilled in response.

Eugene stared at all the expectant faces looking up at him. He sighed.

"There was this book," He began finally, and the other three broke into even bigger grins at the start of his story. "That I used to read to the younger kids all the time: The Tales of Flynnigan Rider. Swashbuckling rouge, bravest man alive," He leaned over to Rapunzel and stage-whispered "Not bad with the ladies, either."

Rapunzel giggled. "Was he a thief, too?"

Eugene paused. "Well . . . no. Actually, he had all the money he ever needed; could go anywhere he wanted to go . . . and for a kid, with nothing . . . " He lowered his eyes to the grass. "I don't know . . . just seemed like a better deal, I guess."

There was a look of sorrow in his eyes at that moment. Hiccup could tell that, for a second, he was going through memories that weren't all remembered fondly. He cleared his throat and shook his head, focusing on the younger teens before him. "Enough about me. I'd like to know about you two, actually. Go on. You already know me and blondie's backstories, now it's your turn."

"Well," Hiccup scratched his head, wondering where to begin. "What do you want to know?"

"Why Curly Sue here ran away, and why you have a dragon." Eugene clarified.

"Oh." He patted Merida out of the glare in her eyes at the nickname, and scratched his head. "Well, I can't speak for Merida, but I didn't just 'get' Toothless one day." His scraped his fingernails down the ridge of fins, smiling faintly at the coo of approval he was rewarded with. "See, where I come from, the people of my village used to kill dragons for necessity. It's a really bad problem, 'cause there's just so many, and they're always attacking our livestock and houses. At some point though, people weren't killing them because we had to any more. People started killing them because it got you status. Popularity. Fame, almost. If you could kill a dragon, it meant you fit in with everyone else. You were one of them. The stronger the dragon you killed, the more popularity you were given. More dragons, longer that attention lasted." He sighed.

" . . . you never killed any, did you?" Rapunzel asked hesitantly.

Hiccup laughed, but the sound was spiteful. "Have you looked at me lately?" He flexed his chicken-bone arm for emphasis. "I couldn't even take down a Terror if my life depended on it. They're the smallest, and the least-dangerous dragons we know of. Anyway, no, I couldn't kill any dragons. So, I was pretty much at the bottom of the social ladder for most of my life. Things were a bit better when my mom was alive. She wasn't as into killing dragons as my dad was, but . . . when she died, I guess he but his grief behind him by looking to me as the next dragon slayer prodigy. Boy, was he wrong about that."

"Okay, so," Eugene interrupted. "Where does the bad-breathed-lizard come into the picture?"

Toothless growled. Hiccup patted him calm again. "I'm getting to that. Since I didn't have the . . . 'physical capabilities' needed to fight dragons without getting myself killed, my dad pulled me out of training and put me up to work as an apprentice for his friend, the blacksmith, Gobber."

Eugene snorted.

"Shut up. Scary names are supposed to ward off evil."

"What's scary about 'Gobber' or 'Hic- ow, okay, I get it!" Eugene rubbed his head and Rapunzel smiled, urging Hiccup to continue.

"Anyway. One night there was an attack on the village, and my dad ordered me to stay inside. Now, I may not be very good with an axe or a shield, but I can probably make you anything you want. I'd be building a machine I could use to take down a dragon for me. Once it was down, I could kill it, and then everyone would stop treating me like I was . . . well. A hiccup. Only," He turned to look at Toothless, the dragon's injured tail curling around him and Merida. "When I finally did manage to take a dragon down . . . nobody believed me. So I had to go out and find him on my own. And I did."

Toothless eyed the smoldering fire and shot a quick blast at it, renewing the flame and making everyone but Hiccup jump. He sighed, laying his head against the beast's neck. "But when I got there . . . I couldn't do it. He was helpless. Defenseless. I just . . . " His

shoulders drooped. "Couldn't."

For a moment, there was no sounds but the fire and the shifting of cloth. Hiccup looked up, surprised, and found Rapunzel sitting on her knees before him. She stretched out her hand and squeezed his. A gentle smile was on her face. "I think you made the right decision," She murmured.

Hiccup smiled back, but he wasn't sure how real it was. "Thanks, but to me honest I don't know if it was . . . he and I started a sort of suedo-friendship, and through it I learned a lot of things that helped me out with the people of my village. My dad even put me back into the training to teach the younger kids how to kill dragons. I was doing well, making friends, and people actually wanted to be around me again! . . . but the final exam . . . " He sighed. "The final exam involved me having to kill a Monstrous Nightmare. They're big, nasty, and their fire burns hotter than anything I've ever seen before in my life."

"So like a lizard Princess, then." Eugene quipped.

Merida kicked him in the shin.

"Ow! I was kidding! Shesh . . . "

Hiccup ignored their exchange and continued. "By that time, Toothless and I were pretty good friends. When I knocked him out of the sky, I hurt his tail fin. Most dragons use them to help them keep steady and balanced in the air. Without it, he couldn't fly. So . . . I built him a new one."

"And that's what t'metal and things on him are for, right?" Merida asked. Hiccup nodded.

"Yeah. I made a prosthetic for him, but the problem is, he can use it on his own. I've got to be flying with him to make it work. I helped him learn how to fly again, and he . . . he became my friend." He looked down at Toothless's eyes, closed and resting soundly with each breath pushing him out a bit. One wing was ever so slightly draped across Hiccup's shoulder. "How could I kill a dragon if . . . another one had already become my best friend?"

"So ye ran away," Merida murmured.

"Yeah. I ran away." Hiccup affirmed. "Packed up with Toothless the day before the test. Didn't care where we were going. First land we hit was the place we found you, Mer. I didn't realize that was Scotland." He looked to her, eyebrow raised and a wry smile playing across his lips. "You said that search party was looking for the princess. You never said you were that princess."

Merida smiled. "You didn't ask."

Rapunzel pushed off of the log and slid down to the grass. "And what about you, Merida? Why did you run away?"

She snorted a laugh. "I think ye'd get a shorter list if ye asked what I was staying there for."

"Okay, but that doesn't answer the question." Hiccup nudged her with

his shoulder. "Everyone else is telling their stories."

Merida scratched at the dirt with a stick. "Compared to yers, it's . . . not as good."

"Come on," Eugene probed.

She scowled, but eventually broke down and told them. "Ever since I was a little girl, I was . . . different, compared to my mum. I was the first-born, and to my Da, he didn't care if I was a boy or a girl. He taught me how to shoot arrows and to fight with swords an' the like. She kept trying to turn me into some . . . proper, obedient, silent little . . . puppet. I'm nae musical. I cannae sing, or dance, or sew or cook. I'm nae a princess. I was barely even a daughter to her."

"Merida," Hiccup began.

"I was just . . . a tool." She hissed, glaring at the fire. "Some . . . thing for her to mold in her image. But that's isnae what I wanted. I just wanted . . . my freedom. To choose however I wanted to live. Things were . . . okay for a while. But then, one day, I found out . . . she was going to marry me off! And she didn't even care! It was like she was selling me like a cow for slaughter!" She stabbed at the ground and yanked it out, throwing the stick as hard as she could into the trees. "Everything she ever talked to me about was how wrong I was! What I wasnae doing anything a princess should!" She whirled on Hiccup, who flinched back a little. "I never asked to be a princess, y'hear?!"

He put his hands in the air. "Okay, okay! We get it. I'd run from a controlling mom too."

Merida scowled and drooped back against Toothless. "It wasnae just about her being controlling. Nothing I did was ever . . . enough for her . . . " She pulled her knees up to her chest and crossed her arms over them. "And the one minute I did something for myself for a change, she just . . . she wouldn't listen. Threw everything I ever cared about into that fire the second I refused to marry those idiots . . . ."

"Merida," Hiccup said, gently, but she shook her head when he reached out to pat her shoulder. He pulled away, sighing. He didn't quite understand. Something about a marriage and a controlling mother. That was the basics, and it was pretty clear that she was still too angry to give a clear description of what happened. But that was alright. She could tell them everything whenever she felt she was ready.

Rapunzel was staring at Merida, her eyes wide. "But . . . but I thought mothers . . . don't they always know what's best?"

Merida snorted. "Not hardly."

Rapunzel lowered her gaze, stricken. Silence descended on the four of them once again, but this time, the quiet wasn't easy. It was heavy, and awkward.

After a while, Eugene cleared his throat and stood up. "W-well, uh. Hey, look at that. We're almost out of firewood. C'mon, shrimp."

Let's go get some more."

"Huh?" Hiccup blinked, yelping when the older man grabbed his arm and heaved him onto his feet.

"Give the girls a minute." He whispered as they walked, and Hiccup waved to Toothless when the dragon hummed with curiosity.

"Hey, uh," Rapunzel said suddenly, catching the boys' attention before they left earshot. "I think . . . I think I like Eugene Fitzherbert, much more than Flynn Rider."

Hiccup looked up at Eugene. His usual cocky mask had melted for a split second, and he could see genuine surprise across the thief's face. But just as quick as it came, it was gone. Eugene waved to the girls, smirk back in its proper place. "You'd be the first." He chuckled, and grabbed Hiccup by the back of the neck. He shoved him forward. "Come on. After all that feelings talk, I think I've got to punch a tree or something before I can feel manly again."

" . . . if you insist." Hiccup commented, single eyebrow raised.

Merida watched as they faded from view, glancing back only when she felt Toothless nuzzle against her side. She reached out and scratched his scales. "I'm alright," She murmured softly, looking up at Rapunzel. " . . . but are ye?"

She looked up, surprised. "Of- of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

"Well, ye," Merida looked away, then back. "Ye've got a strange look in yer-"

Toothless let out a growl and tensed up. Merida looked down at him. "What is it? Toothless?"

"Well," Commented a new voice that echoed around their campsite. Rapunzel went rigid, terror flashing across her face. "I thought they'd \_never \_leave."

Rapunzel whirled around as Toothless sprung forward, planting himself between the girls and the newcomer.

" . . . \_mother?\_"

### 13. Twelve: There For Me

\*\*Sooooo guess who's not dead! Sorry this chapter was so late in coming you guys, but I'd lost my muse for a little while there. I'm hoping to hold onto it a little bit longer this time . . . most likely by tying it up and locking it in a closet or something. Anyway, I doubt you guys are even still reading this little note, so. Go ahead and read, I know you want to.\*\*

\*\*Chapter Twelve: There For You\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><em>~Corona~<em>

The silence through the dark forest hit both girls like symbol crashes. Ice sparked its way down Rapunzel's spine, chilling her body from the inside out. It was her mother, no doubt about the fact in her mind. The dark-haired woman in the form-fitting red gown stood calmly before the two girls, showing no sign of surprise at the sight of the big black dragon baring his teeth at her. The woman stepped forward, patting him once on the head and offered them both a small, bright smile.

"Hello, dear."

Merida lifted her hand as Pascal cowered away from the voice, and she was quick to pick the little guy up and tuck him safely into a pocket in her skirt. Rapunzel stood quickly off the fallen log and stepped back, shaking her head. Gothel made her way around Toothless toward them. "B-but- how did you-" Gothel took her arms and pulled her into a hug, just a bit too long and a bit too tight. "How did you find me?"

Gothel hummed, smoothing her hand gently down the back of Rapunzel's head. "Oh, it was easy, really," she said easily, completely ignoring Merida and Toothless as they stood awkwardly a few steps away. What else could they do? "I just listened for the sound of complete and utter betrayal and followed that."

Merida bristled.

Rapunzel sighed. It was fess time, she supposed. "Mother . . .  
"

Gothel pulled away before she could finish. "We're going home, Rapunzel," she said firmly, and took her wrist in an iron grip. "Now." Rapunzel stumbled a few steps forward as her mother yanked her forward. She pulled her arm free and stepped back.

"N-no, mother, wait," she insisted with a light shake of her head and a weak smile. "You don't understand. I've been on this incredible journey and I've done and seen so much! I've made new friends, and I . . . " Merida stood as Rapunzel gestured to her. "Look! See? This is Merida, and that's-"

"Yes, yes," Gothel cut her off quickly. "The wanted thief, two dirty runaways, and a couple lizards. I'm very proud. Now," the woman reached for Rapunzel's wrist again and when she caught it, managed to pull her another few feet away from their small campsite. "We. Are. Leaving."

Toothless lowered his body to the ground, lips curling back from his teeth. A low growl rumbled out of him, and this time Merida heeded his warning. She inched step-by-step to where she had left her sword. Both girl and dragon could sense that something was off, and neither liked it.

"Mother, please!" This time when Rapunzel pulled free, she used such a force that it nearly knocked Gothel off her balance. "Just, just listen to me, please." She begged. "These are . . . they are my friends, and they . . . they're helping me. They promised to take me to the see the lanterns and get me home safe, so you don't have to-"

Gothel's eyes narrowed slightly. "And . . . you trust them."

"I do," Rapunzel said honestly. "They . . . they wouldn't hurt me. Right, Merida?" She turned to the red-headed princess, who bowed her head in an honest nod. Gothel's scowl deepened. "Everyone's been so nice to me, mother. Hiccup and Merida, Toothless . . . even Eugene . . ." She turned her gaze downward and her smile became shy. "Mother," she whispered. "I think . . . I think he likes me . . ."

There was a trace of hope in her voice. A hope in her eyes and in her heart that had never been there before, and Gothel pounced on it quick as lightning and fully intending on tearing it to shreds.

"\_'Likes you'\_" She repeated, her voice sarcastic and sweetly toxic. "Please, Rapunzel, that's demented!" She stepped around her daughter and rolled her eyes, laughing.

Rapunzel's shoulders lowered slightly, and she sighed in a sort of long-suffering manner. It seemed too familiar an action for Merida's liking. "Mother," Rapunzel began, ready to try to try and speak her case again from the beginning.

"This is why you never should have left!" Gothel spoke over her daughter before she'd even fully taken the breath speak. It was becoming clear that the woman had no interest in hearing anything that Rapunzel had to say. "Dear, this whole romance you've invented around these strangers? It just proves that you're too naive to be here."

Gothel held out her arms and Merida found herself scowling at how Rapunzel allowed herself to be hugged by the poisonous woman. Hearing that this girl had been forbidden from leaving such a secluded place had been plenty to tickle Merida's concern, but seeing first-hand how easily Gothel spun her wicked words around Rapunzel's mind made her sick. She had remained silent through this whole exchange simply because it wasn't her place to get involved, but it was becoming too hard to hold back her voice. So she didn't. "She is not," Merida snapped, the force of the word allowing her to push past her own accent and stress the sharpness of the 'T'.

Rapunzel's eyes widened at her friend's argument. Despite it, however, she was ignored. "Why would he like you, come on now, really?" Gothel asked. She caressed the side of Rapunzel's cheek upwards toward her hair, and pulled two handfuls of her blond mane out to shove in her face like it was an example. "Just look at you, do you think that's he's impressed?" Gothel all but threw Rapunzel's hair at her when the girl pulled away.

Merida grit her teeth, her scowl a fine imitation of the one Toothless was sporting.

"Don't be a dummy," Gothel cooed. "Come, with mummy." She stepped back, toward the trail in the woods. She stood silhouetted against the white of the fog raising up around and behind her, the stark cold darkness in sharp contrast with the glowing warmth of their small campfire. "Mother . . ."

"No!"

The finality in Rapunzel's voice startled them all, even herself. Everyone's attention fixed on her for several tense heartbeats, on her furrowed eyebrows and clenched fists, until Gothel slowly lowered her arms.

" . . . 'no'?" Her voice drifted through the clearing dangerously low. "\_Oh\_. I see how it is."

The tall woman drifted her way over in a few short steps, her skirt swirling.

>"<em>Rapunzel knows best!<em>  
><em>Rapunzel's so mature, now!<em>  
><em>Such a clever grown-up miss!"<em>

She pinched Rapunzel's cheek, a sharp pain that had the blonde quickly pushing away. Merida wasn't sure where the words came from, but the urge to say them was stronger than the will to stay silent. No, she would not stay silent. Refused.

"\_Rapunzel knows best!\_  
><em>Rapunzel's old enough, now!<em>  
><em>She doesn't need to pass your stupid test!<em>"

Rapunzel's eyes widened at the sound of Merida's voice, breaking into her mother's familiar song. She said the same thing Gothel had, but . . . it sounded different. Like they meant something else.

"\_Rapunzel knows best!\_" Gothel continued to mock.  
>"<em>Fine, if you're so sure, then,<em>  
><em>Go ahead and give him <em>this!"

Rapunzel once again felt her blood running cold, heat prickling at the back of her neck. Gothel had reached into her cloak and pulled out the brown leather shoulder bag- Eugene's satchel. The one he needed. The one she'd hidden in her secret hiding place back inside the tower. Mother knew about the satchel. Mother knew about the hiding place. Shaking her head in disbelief, Rapunzel whispered, "H-How did you-"

"This \_is why he's here!\_" Gothel pulled the the shiny round hoop- the crown- out of the bag, and held it up in front of Rapunzel's face. So close that she could see through the blue clear gem in the center.  
>"<em>Don't let him deceive you<em>!"

"\_Eugene doesn't need it!\_" Merida tried to refrain from shouting. It was not a very enthusiastic attempt. She didn't like the thief, but she didn't like Gothel more.  
>"<em>That's not what he's here for!<em>  
><em>Don't let her lie to you!<em>"

"\_Trust me, my dear,\_" Gothel snapped her fingers.  
>"<em>That's how fast he'll leave you!<em>  
><em>I won't say 'I told you so!<em>' "

"\_She's lying,\_  
><em>Rapunzel, listen,<em>  
><em>She doesn't really know!<em>"



Rapunzel kept looking back and forth between her mother and her friend, feeling that even though they were speaking to her, it felt more like they were arguing with each other. She didn't know who to listen to anymore.

"\_No! Rapunzel knows best!\_" Gothel shouted, throwing her hands into the air. She curled her way around Rapunzel, always in her space despite how hard the girl was trying to keep her distance.

>"<em>Fine! If he's such a dream-boat,<em>  
><em>Go and put him,<em>  
><em>To the test!<em>"

She shoved away and tossed the crown at Rapunzel, who just barely managed to catch it. Rapunzel stood holding the crown, staring down into the crystals and jewels sparkling back at her. She swallowed and turned her eyes back up onto Gothel. "I will," she said, defiantly, and put back her shoulders. "I will!"\*\*  
><strong>

Gothel turned, and in a great sweeping arch of her cloak and skirt, she returned to the edge of their clearing. Her voice echoed through the darkness around her, hitting Rapunzel hard and making her flinch.

>"<em>If he's lying,<em>  
><em>Don't come crying!<em>"

Merida stepped forward, placing herself beside Rapunzel. Her shoulders were strong and her grip around her sword was tight. Yeah, that woman better be leaving like she thought she was.

"\_Mother!\_  
><em>Knows best!<em>"

Gothel turned on her heel, her song over and done. Rapunzel tightened her hold on the golden edges of the crown as her mother turned her back, but didn't move or say a word until her cloaked form disappeared into the fog and darkness.

Merida waited a few heavy heartbeats before she turned her head slightly, chancing a cautious look at her friend. Rapunzel's spine was straight and stiff, her eyes wide and unblinking. She was holding onto a breath to say something; to Merida or to Gothel was anyone's guess. The red-headed princess hesitated before lifting a hand and placing it on her shoulder. "Rapunzel?

That touched crumpled her. Rapunzel's shoulders sagged and she fell in on herself, chest heaving with the effort of her breaths. Confronting her mother like that, without any time to prepare herself mentally had taken it's toll on her. Merida was quick to catch the taller girl and steady her again. She looked pale, staring down at the golden tiara and gripping it between white-knuckled fists. It was so startlingly unlike her that Merida felt a strong urge to say something. The words come on their own, from a place deep in her heart where love and hatred have always been at war.

"\_Mothers . . .\_  
><em>Don't always,<em>  
><em>Know what's best . . .<em> " \*\*

><strong>

The corners of Rapunzel's lips twitched upwards in a sad attempt at a smile. She squeezed Merida's fingers. "Thank you," she murmured, and turned back to watch the empty shadows before them. Toothless lumbered his way toward them and bumped Rapunzel's other shoulder with his head, and nuzzled her neck gently. That actually got a small giggle out of her. "Thank you." she said again, this time with a bit more of her usual cheerfulness. \*\*

><strong>

"Hey, blondie!"

Eugene's voice caused both girls and lizards jump. Rapunzel and Merida's eyes fixed on each other before snapping to the crown in Rapunzel's hands.

"Settle an argument for us, will you?"

The two girls came to an agreement in seconds. Merida snatched up the satchel from where Gothel had tossed it to the ground, and took the crown from Rapunzel's hands.

"Is there any chance that I'm going to end up with super strength in my hand?" Eugene asked them as he approached, a large bundle of large dry sticks in his hands. Hiccup followed not far behind, rolling his eyes and carrying a smaller but still plentiful pile of his own.

"Because, I'm not going to lie, that would be stupendous."

The boys stopped by the campfire to drop off their firewood. Rapunzel was keeping her back to them for a few minutes too long and after a quick search they found the top of Merida's wild hair poking out from behind a low tree stump. Hiccup dropped his sticks and rubbed his hand against Toothless when he bound his way over to greet them.

"What's going on?" He asked slowly. "Are you guys alright?"

Rapunzel turned and Merida stood up, both a bit too quickly. "Hm?" Rapunzel blinked, then broke into a wide smile. "Oh, sorry. Merida was just, um . . . We were-"

"I was showin' her the different kinds of trees!" Merida cut in, nodding enthusiastically. "An' what different things ye can make from 'em!"

"Yes! That's it!" Rapunzel bobbed her head in a few quick nods.

Hiccup and Eugene shared a look. Then they simply shrugged.

"I mean, here's the thing!" Eugene continued, kneeling down to start putting their firewood into some semblance of a reasonable pile.

"Superhuman good looks? I always had 'em, born with it!"

"You're not that good-looking," Hiccup muttered dryly, and sat down on the sitting log with a wry smile playing at the corner of his lips. Toothless walked around behind him and placed his large head into the boy's lap.

"Shush." Eugene glared at him. "But superhuman strength? Can you imagine the possibilities of it!?"

Merida sat down beside Hiccup and the boy leaned toward her, one hand held up over his mouth like he was sharing a secret. "I've already told him that it's not going to happen."

"Excuse me!" Eugene snapped, and jabbed a stick in the younger man's direction. "You have a dragon, she's a princess, and her hair is magic! Who knows what else is possible around here!"

Rapunzel giggled along with everyone else as they laughed, and picked up her skirt so she could sit down in the grass by the fire. She smiled and listened to her friends as they talked . . . but no matter the strength of her willpower, her eyes kept drifting to the stump with the hidden crown. Her mind kept circling back to all the things her mother and Merida had said. Their voices were at war inside her mind, but she managed to hide it well behind a cheerful smile. Her thoughts were a scramble of things she'd always been told . . . and things she was just beginning to think.

Maybe mothers . . . really didn't always know best.

\* \* \*

><p><em>Thunder rolled over head, but not a single drop of rain found a way inside their circle of golden warmth. A child played on the floor, carved horses and soldiers waging playful war against each other in her hands. <em>

\_A hearth crackled and popped behind her, spilling comfort and warmth around the stone room. A woman was sitting in a high-backed wooden chair, humming a light and familiar tune under her breath as she worked. Her voice was soft and light, fingers moving with thread through a long drapery thrown across her lap. She didn't stop her song even as she finished with the thread she was using, just reached down into a wicker basket at her feet for another spool.\_

\_The child looked up at the woman and smiled, giggling as her horses and soldiers charged imaginary enemy forces. She cheered when they claimed victory, looking away from the battle just in time for the thin glass windows in their stone walls to flash bright, blinding white. \_

\_Thunder crashed above their heads, louder than a tree trunk snapping and falling to the forest floor. The child screamed, sure the tree would come down through the walls and the windows to crush them. She abandoned her soldiers on their battlefield and scrambled for the edge of the woman's tapestry, flinging herself underneath it for protection. \_

\_The woman chuckled and set down her needle and thread. She could feel the child clinging to her, and lifts the tapestry so she can look down at her. "Oh, darling," she cooed lovingly, brushing away a fiery red curl. "Little Merida, my brave wee lassie, I'm here."\_

\_She drew her daughter into her arms and held her against her tightly. "I will always be here." She promised her, and gently ran her hand down the back of the child's head. She starts her song anew with her daughter clutched to her chest, and this time the child sings along with her. \_

\_The horses and soldiers would win the battle fine without their general, and with the song drowning out the sound of the storm, the thunder wasn't so scary anymore. \_

\_"I love you, mummy . . . " \_

\* \* \*

><p><em>~Corona~<em>

A scream shattered the dream before Merida had the time to really reflect on it. She lurched upright, sending Rapunzel's chameleon Pascal flying off of her head.

A pure white horse had one of Eugene's feet in his teeth, as was dragging him quickly away no matter how hard he was digging his hands into the dirt to slow the horse down. "Help!" He shouted at her. "Help help help!"

It took her a moment, but she realized what was going on. The princess grabbed her sword and kicked Hiccup. "Up!" She yelled, startling him and Rapunzel awake. "Up! Up up! C'mon!"

They were quick to scramble to their feet and give chase, close behind Merida as she ran. She was the first to reach Eugene and grabbed his wrists, pulling with all her might. Rapunzel was next to offer her help, wrapping her arms around Merida's waist while Hiccup brought up the rear. Their combined strength really wasn't all that much, between two thin girls and a lanky boy like Hiccup, but they definitely gave the horse a run for its money.

"Give . . . me . . . him!" Merida grunted out from between her teeth, and with one last sharp yank from behind them, Eugene's foot came popping out from inside his boot. The four humans immediately went flying backwards, and landed in a pile at the base of a tree.

"Thanks, bud," Hiccup said weakly, and Toothless grunted his reply.

The horse shook off his surprise, tossing his mane and whinnying with disapproval. He got back up onto his feet and charged at them, both ears back in fury.

Merida dropped her sword and flung her hands into the air. She remembered this. The horses at the castle were usually well behaved, but that didn't mean nothing ever spooked them. She knew how to calm her horse Angus down whenever he went into a tizzy, and she hoped with all her might that it would work in this situation too.

"Woah!" She shouted, hands up to ward the horse away. "Woah woah! Easy, laddie, easy!" She made sure to keep herself in between the horse and her friends. He weaved left and right and tried to get past her, but she was stubborn and knew what she was doing. "Easy! Easy, laddie, calm down now! C'mon!"

Eventually, the horse stopped trying to get past Merida to Eugene and finally focused on the girl in front of him. She smiled widely, now sure she could do this. "Thatta lad, yeah. Easy, calm down."

The horse stopped moving, staring at Merida. Or, rather, what was directly behind, Merida. Toothless, easily twice the horse's size, had left Hiccup's side to instead loom over Merida's shoulder and give his best dragon stare. The horse stared at the dragon, and found he had no urge to try and get past the girl any more.

"There we go," Merida praised him cheerfully, completely unaware of scaly fire-breathing backup. "Ain't that better, yeah?"

Rapunzel perked up, encouraged by Merida's success, and edged her way around Toothless to stand up front with the horse. "Now sit!" She ordered, trying to mimic Merida's authoritative stance.

Merida furrowed her eyebrows. "Eh, Rapunzel, tha's not how ye . . ."

"Sit!" Rapunzel repeated, and this time, the horse obeyed. He folded his back legs and sat, looking not at all pleased with the situation.

"What?" Eugene exclaimed from the back.

"Now drop the boot!" Rapunzel ordered. The horse gave her an annoyed glare. "\_Drop it,\_" she repeated warningly.

The horse gave another grunt of annoyance, but eventually gave in to Rapunzel's orders if only because of the dragon still perched over her shoulder. Eugene's boot now safely on the ground and no longer in any danger, Rapunzel was free to say her friendly hellos to this new strange creature. "Aw," she cooed, cupping the horse's face and rubbing his brow. "You're such a \_good boy!\_" She praised. "Ooh, yes you are!"

Merida stepped back to watch the scene play out, and didn't quite look like she knew exactly what to make of it. She'd never seen or heard of a horse act so much like one of her Da's hunting dogs. This was new . . . and weird.

"Do I . . . want to know what's going on right now?" Hiccup asked her.

"Dunno," Merida replied softly. "Not sure I want to neither."

"Aw, he's just tired," Rapunzel informed them. "Spent all day chasing the big bad man all over the place, didn't you, hm?"

"Excuse me?" Eugene snapped, offended. Rapunzel chose to ignore him.

"Nobody appreciates you, do they?" She asked the horse, hugging him around the neck as far as she could reach. "Do they?" The horse shook his head and hugged her back to the best of his ability.

Random songs and oddly intelligent horses. Really. What else was there around here that was unusual?

"Oh come on!" Eugene complained. "He's a bad horse!"

"Isn't this the horse that we were sword fightin' with?" Merida asked

the thief. She immediately decided that sentence was the strangest thing she'd ever said.

"Yes!"

"Oh stop," Rapunzel rolled her eyes as she scratched the horse under his chin. "He's just a big sweet heart . . . isn't that right, boy? Huh?" She lowered her gaze and noticed a clasp on his saddle straps. The clasp was decorated with the star burst symbol of the kingdom, as well as the name "Maximus", written in shining gold letters. "Maximus," She repeated, the horse neighed in response. "Huh? Maximus? Yeah, that's your name, huh? Aw, good boy, good boy!"

"You've got to be kidding me," Eugene huffed and dropped to the ground, crossing his arms and legs and pouting. Rapunzel once again ignored him, and stepped back to give the horse another wide smile.

"Listen," she began, tilting her body around to hang upside down and look the horse in the eye. "You're with the guards, right? Well . . . see I know you've been chasing Eugene for a really long time, but we kind of . . . need you to help us keep him from getting arrested."

The horse neighed in disapproval.

"I know! I know, that's probably a lot to ask," Rapunzel continued with a sigh. "But this is . . . \_kind of\_ the \_biggest\_ day of my life. It's not for forever! Just . . . twenty-four hours. That's it, that's all." She stepped back and urged Eugene to stand back up by grabbing his arm. The man stood, brushed off his pants, and turned to the horse with an expression clearly saying 'I can't believe I'm doing this'. He held out his hand for a handshake.

Maximus the horse glared at the offered hand and turned his head away. Rapunzel bit her lip and leaned forward a little bit. "And it's . . . also my birthday . . . just so you know."

The horse huffed again, but was only able to keep up his tough charade for a few more seconds before he blew his lips and grunted, accepting his fate. He turned back to Eugene and held up one of his front hooves to shake.

Rapunzel beamed. There! With the threat of Eugene's arrest mostly out of the way, she was able to focus solely on her birthday and seeing the lanterns with her friends.

A distant bell chimed the hour. The sound echoed through the trees, and no one really payed attention to it until they noticed Rapunzel's smile go slack. Her eyes were wide with wonder at the sound she'd never heard, slowly making her way toward a break in the trees.

Maximus used this distraction to kick Eugene in the stomach.

Hiccup sighed. "This is going to be a \_loooong \_day."

End

file.